

Moscow ■

TURKEY AND RUSSIA IN SYRIA

TESTING

THE EXTREMES

Ankara ■

HASAN YÜKSELEN

Damascus

SETA

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HASAN YÜKSELEN

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To my family, Sevil, Melis, and Deniz

FOREWORD

Geographically positioned at the intersection of several regional disputes in the Middle East, Turkey has always been a major actor both in military and diplomatic terms. Especially in the Syrian crisis, Turkey is among the countries that have borne the brunt of the crisis militarily, diplomatically, and morally.

As the implications of an “alliance” seems to change daily, allies tend to experience disagreements over strategy on many issues. Moreover, states seek to cooperate with their old enemies on a range of diverse issues. For example, in recent years, Turkey has been engaging in intense diplomacy with Russia in the hope of finding common ground on regional conflicts.

Due to the problems in its neighborhood, Turkey is not in a position to afford one-sided dependence which could force the country to stop pursuing its national interests. Rather than one-sided dependence, Turkey aspires to “strategic ties” with the U.S. and Russia that, in turn, are vulnerable to tensions precisely because they provide no room for one-sided dependence. In today's world, however, a strategic partnership does not necessarily mean opting for an ideological bloc.

After the downing of the Russian fighter jet in 2015, the relationship between Turkey and Russia suffered from an increasing degree of unpredictability and instability. However, after the launching of Turkey's military operations in Syria, Turkey and Russia found grounds for cooperation and initiated the Astana process with Iran as a complement to the Geneva process. The Astana process has encouraged Turkey and Russia to work more closely in Syria.

Turkey and Russia, which have kept their conflicts of interest in Syria under control until now, could face new problems if their paths were to cross. Obviously, several third parties would be eager to take advantage of

a Turkish-Russian disagreement. Reactions from Washington and Brussels, too, are on Turkey's radar – the big question being what concrete support, beyond initial statements, would be offered by the West. In a time of Western unwillingness to engage Syria strategically, Turkey has been forced to find its own way forward. From time to time, the Turkish-Russian relations suffer serious ups and downs, and leader-to-leader diplomacy is the last resort before a strategic rupture in bilateral relations. If the two countries cannot find a new solution to growing escalations in Syria and the region within the current framework, the rapprochement of recent years could give way to alienation.

Russia must pay heed to the serious risks to the bilateral relations and stop playing the Idlib card against Turkey. Moscow's current course threatens to destroy the "strategic ties" that Ankara and Moscow have developed in recent years. For the Russians, Idlib may have strategic significance as a link between Damascus, Aleppo, and Latakia. Yet, the province means much more to Turkey. For Ankara, Idlib is key to secure its national security and is crucial to facilitating a genuine political transition process in Syria.

A quick look at the big picture reveals that the Kremlin didn't want to risk its fruitful cooperation with Turkey to appease the Assad regime. Putin saw that working with President Erdoğan was in his own best interest and that for the sake of the bilateral relationship's future, preventing clashes and reaching an agreement was the most sensible solution. After all, the many areas of cooperation between Turkey and Russia required the two countries to build on the leaders' long history of negotiations and manage the Syrian crisis together.

I strongly believe that this book provides a timely assessment of the current state of affairs of the bilateral relations between Turkey and Russia. By analyzing alliance options between Russia and Turkey, the book aspires to promote an understanding and an awareness of the possible future courses of the bilateral relations in light of the historical context. I thank the author for his fruitful contribution to the existing literature.

Prof. Dr. Burhanettin Duran
General Coordinator, SETA

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This book is the outcome of my postdoctoral studies that I conducted as a visiting research fellow at the Changing Character of War (CCW) Centre, Pembroke College, at the University of Oxford in 2019. It was a stimulating stay at the University of Oxford, where I found the chance to attend thought-provoking seminars, discussions, and talks. Being surrounded by astute students of strategic studies, the only thing remains is to absorb the knowledge, process, and pour your thoughts on paper.

During my stay, I had the chance to work with Dr. Andrew Monaghan, who is in my opinion an expert on Russia, and an avid student for his humble opinion. Andrew set ambitious and challenging objectives, which made my stay at CCW a productive one. I am grateful for his encouraging tutorship. The Director of CCW Dr. Robert Johnson made eye-opening comments, which increased the worth of my research. Elizabeth Robson was always helpful to facilitate the smooth functioning of my stay. An early draft of this manuscript was read by the CCW fellows, and their comments made vital contributions. I am thankful for their thought-provoking comments.

Apparently, there are no manuscripts that are mature enough to reach readers without critical debates and insightful comments by colleagues, fellows, and friends. Professor Hüseyin Bağcı, Associate Pro-

fessor Murat Yeşiltaş, and my colleagues Cem Bucak, Serkan Balkan, and Yiğit Sipahi read the early version of this book and provided their valuable comments. I am grateful to them.

I am also grateful to my family. With each book I write, my debt to them goes far beyond the words of appreciation. I am deeply grateful to my dear wife Sevil, and my children Melis and Deniz. Probably throughout my writing journey, they were the most affected ones. During my frequent absences, they never hesitated to back me, to be patient, and to show their boundless love. The dedication of this book to them only begins to mirror their devotion to supporting me. This book is an outcome of collective effort, and we made it again!

INTRODUCTION

On November 24, 2015, when Turkey downed a Russian Su-24 aircraft violating the Turkish airspace, it was perceived as an act with the inherent potential to trigger a war. Nevertheless, thankfully, it did not happen. Moreover, after restoring the relations within nine months, when Turkey reached an agreement with Iran and Russia to initiate the Astana process aiming to resolve the Syrian War and sealed the deal to purchase S-400 air defense systems, the question of whether a Russo-Turkish alliance was established was raised. From a broader perspective labeling the events as war and alliance might be seen as a misleading exaggeration. Nevertheless, treating them as tested extremes and exploring the underlying dynamics form a worthwhile and compelling intellectual endeavor.

This book will answer the key research question of which characteristics (changing or enduring) of the Syrian War caused Turkey and Russia to oscillate between the extremes of war and alliance. By focusing on these characteristics in Syria, commonly accepted as a proxy war but with subtle changes to the definition due to its context, this book shows how the changing character of war influences state behaviors and relations both between and among them. Addressing the underlying question of what makes states cooperate while carrying on and/or being forced to accommodate diverging strategic ends, conditioned

by unbalanced military power and laden with contentious agendas, uncovers the embedded controversies of the process that facilitates this oscillation. Finally, to reveal the broader implications, highlight the relevance, and to make a contribution to the literature based on the research, this study addresses the overarching question of how proxy wars alter interstate relations and relations within alliances.

The purpose of this research is to explore causal forces embedded within proxy wars that have the potential to alter the nature of relations between sovereign states. The fact that Turkey and Russia oscillated between the extremes within the context of the Syrian conflict is deemed to posit a case study that has the potential to contribute to the understanding of the causal forces of proxy wars and their implications on interstate relations, alliance formations, and/or alterations.

The importance of the research question stems from the unique context of the Syrian conflict. As for the context of the research, it is the embedded diverse, volatile, and conflicting dynamics of the actors, processes, and strategic interests of the protagonists, all of which lead to rapid changes in the orientation of actors and the direction of developments. Russia and Turkey, within the context of the Syrian War, faced similar kind of volatility in their relationship as well. Russia and Turkey have diverging views on the future of the Assad regime and the opposition groups while sharing converging prospects on the territorial integrity of Syria. Russia-Turkey relations also oscillated between the extremes, even testing them. The downing of a Russian fighter aircraft by Turkey pushed the two countries from rivalry to the edge of war, demonstrating one extreme; the Astana talks on the future of Syria and its outcome of establishing de-escalation zones, the Idlib accords, together with the agreed delivery of Russia's S-400 missile system to Turkey, highlighted the other extreme of a mutual alignment, to the extent of triggering international discussions about "Turkey's change of axis." The role of the U.S. actions or inactions has also contributed to the mutation of the conflict leading to a change in the character of

war. Particularly, the proxy relationship between the United States and the PKK offshoot, the PYD/YPG, impacted not only the character of war but also the character of relations.

The oscillation between the two extremes, war and alignment, or to put it differently and with a slight exaggeration, “a NATO ally at war; a NATO ally’s fallout,” demonstrates a fundamental lack of understanding of the dynamics of the Syrian conflict that paved the way to the emergence of these extremes.

The character of the war in Syria is commonly explained with the notion of a “proxy war,” in which states refrain from openly fighting with each other, but prefer to support proxies militarily to realize their political objectives. Another prominent feature that does not help common understanding is that the Syrian battlefield represents conflicting and incommensurable interests and prospects while harboring a diversity of terrorist organizations whose legitimacy could not be agreed on by the many nations involved. At the same time, the war has caused a humanitarian crisis.

Russia and Turkey have different and mostly conflicting strategic ends, which are still geopolitical in essence. Turkey’s primary strategic goal is to prevent the PYD/YPG from gaining any form of autonomy, and to keep the PYD/YPG contained and block its reach to the Eastern Mediterranean (EMED). At the same time, Moscow seeks to maintain its basing rights in Syria, allowing long-term power projection to the EMED and the Middle East. On the one hand, both Russia and Turkey agree on a future regime that ensures those objectives, yet, on the other hand, they disagree on its nature and configuration. Their tactical deployment of “means” to shape the conflict also differed. While Ankara relied more on lower-profile tools such as combat drones and special operations backing opposition armed groups, Moscow pursued its strategy with high-profile conventional naval and air forces in support of pro-regime forces. In that sense, the conduct of war and methods also differ significantly with the former using more sophisticated

and tailored methods in keeping with the needs of the battlefield and the latter preferring more conventional methods tailored to projecting power. However, in the end, it also suggests the different expectations from the post-conflict environment. Then the question arises as to what makes and drives them to keep cooperating despite the existing stark differences in terms of ends, means, and concerns. Normally, what would be anticipated is a further deterioration or, at least, a deepening of grievances between Ankara and Moscow, which is not extensively observed. Nevertheless, from the spatiotemporal context of the Syrian conflict, in which space refers to the limited geography of Syria and time refers to the duration of the war, a long-term enduring alignment/alliance is not expected, and offers a test of the extreme positions unless Ankara and Moscow find a common ground of understanding and interest in another additional and wider geographical area. Irrespective of how broad or narrow the conflict's spatiotemporal context, it has triggered broader implications and discussions.

This book argues that the territorialization of terrorist groups might prompt changes in the strategic calculations of external actors that initially might have been unwilling to intervene militarily. Their military involvement either to curb, alter, or lead the direction of the territorialization beyond having the potential to create deep grievances emerged out of diverging strategic threat perceptions, interests, or strategic end-states, which might alter their relationships. In other words, the changing character of war, which evolved into a proxy war, triggered a change in their relationships. In some cases old rivalries might be overcome, in others the solidarity between allies can be undermined. How this happens is explained through the growing agencies of non-state actors, who were employed as proxies, which becomes a factor that constrains – if not determines – the behaviors of state actors. Hence, the most relevant and boldest suggestion and conclusion of this book is that proxy warfare undermines long-lasting alliances and cultivates new ones, which might still be subject to the stress test.

Within this context, the book is organized in five chapters that address the evolution and change of the protests into an internal war and later into a proxy war. The first chapter of the book, “Pretexts,” is devoted to contextualizing how the Syrian conflict underwent a mutation that led to the territorialization of threats. The initial hesitance of the actors to become involved in the Syrian crisis, arguably not only caused escalation but also led to eventual mutation. Once the conflict had mutated, with the subsequent power vacuum, different non-state actors began to expand their influence in Syria with the support of state actors. The hesitance to support the opposition’s demands for regime change and the inaction to protect them against the atrocities of the regime, while causing the opposition to peel off and for some of its factions to radicalize, also opened conducive ground for the terrorist organizations with diverse agendas that stepped in to capitalize on that vacuum. The initial outcome of that process was the territorialization of the PYD/YPG, an offshoot of the PKK, with its secessionist goals in Syria which also later attempted to replicate the ‘Rojava’ model in Turkey.¹ The second element, similar to the statehood claim by the PYD/YPG, came by the rapid expansion of DAESH and the control of vast territories in Iraq and Syria, but with different terms of governing and driving ideology. The territorialization of these non-state actors was experienced at the expense of the deterritorialization of both the regime and the moderate opposition, a proponent of democracy.

The second chapter entitled “Acts” starts with a discussion on the implications of the (de)territorialization dynamics in Syria, which prompted major powers to change their strategies in line with the diverging strategic end-states. While the territorialization of the DAESH threat has led the U.S. to engage militarily and to establish a proxy relationship with the PYD/YPG, Russia was also militarily involved

¹ With the term “Rojava” model, I am referring to the efforts and attempt to build a proto-state in the east of the Euphrates in Syria out of the territorialization of a terrorist organisation, the PYD/YPG, at the expense of another terrorist organisation, DAESH, and its claim to govern the spaces it controls.

by using similar threats this time due to the deterritorialization of the regime. Their military engagements distanced Turkey both from Russia and the United States, leading to a deterioration of relations with both.

The third chapter, “Outcomes,” focuses primarily on the factors that brought about a strategy change in Ankara, which prompted a military engagement resulting from growing distrust towards U.S. actions and a response to the territorialization of the PYD/YPG. Ankara perceived the territorialization of the PYD/YPG along the Turkish borders in northern Syria as a threat, which was encouraged by the U.S. to deterritorialize the DAESH threat. The growth of distrust between two NATO allies (the U.S. and Turkey) upon the diverging threat perceptions and subsequent conflicting actions taken to alleviate them caused them to drift apart. The inevitable outcome of the process was the strategy change in Ankara that prompted military intervention first to fight DAESH and then to eliminate the PYD/YPG’s terrorism and to block its potential reach to the Eastern Mediterranean. This chapter discusses how Turkey’s military response evolved from a defensive one (Operation Shah Euphrates) to an offensive one (Operations Euphrates Shield, Olive Branch, and Peace Spring) and its causal factors.

The fourth chapter, “Impacts,” is devoted to the analysis of the underlying factors that caused Russia and Turkey to oscillate between war and alliance. The theme this chapter will explore is how the changing character of war prompted the testing of extreme situations. Due to the ambiguous nature of the conflict, Turkey experienced several setbacks, as did all major actors following their respective miscalculations. After downing a Russian aircraft in Syria, Turkey was on the brink of war and tested one extreme of the relationship. This action can be seen as an outcome of the growing distrust towards Moscow’s acts in Syria, which were perceived as detrimental to Turkey’s security interests. Nevertheless, they managed to find grounds for rapprochement and to improve those grounds for further cooperation in Syria as the distrust and growing threat of the PYD/YPG with the support of the

U.S. became significant. The improving relations between Moscow and Ankara reached a level that raised the question of whether Turkey was disassociating itself from the West and even stepping back from NATO. The true nature of both war and alliance will be discussed to reveal the prospects and limits of the latter.

The last chapter of the book entitled “Prospects” capitalizes on the theme of the changing character of war to consider the changing character of Turkey’s relations with both the U.S. and Russia. The first part of the chapter will argue how a proxy war unintentionally created room for non-state actors to expand their agency, and eventually to determine the behaviors of their perpetrators. The erosion of awareness of state actors facing the embedded uncertainty of the changing character of war inadvertently brought about the erosion of their agency and introduced the determination of their actions by non-state actors. In other words, the proxy war and uncertainty not only soured their bilateral relations to the extent of almost causing a collision, as in the case of Turkey and Russia, but they also undermined the alliance coherence as observed in the case of Turkey and the United States. The second part of the chapter will discuss the primary determinants of the future course of relations for Turkey, both with the U.S. and Russia, since none of the actors could manage to overcome the distrust caused by the soured relations and fluctuating alignments of the past or to build trust for future constructive endeavors.

Finally, this book answers the following questions which broaden the theoretical perspectives on alliances and strategizing: Is the traditional understanding of strategic thinking and alliances still relevant? Are we in need of redefining and adapting our understanding of both the process of strategizing and alliances for the sake of being more adaptive and responsive to the changing character of war?



ONE

PRETEXTS – ORIGINS,
ESCALATION, AND
MUTATION



ORIGINS

The Syrian War, in its early stages, was no more than the people's request for more freedom and the improvement of their living conditions, which made it a pro-democratic movement in essence. In fact, it was a continuation of the Arab Spring's pro-democracy movements with a lower profile of protests. However, the democratic movements rallied against authoritarian leaders quickly transformed themselves from protests and uprisings into violence with the harsh response from the respective governments. Some of them proved themselves to be successful in ending the long tenure of authoritarian leaders as was observed in Tunisia and Egypt. In other cases, the violence overshadowed the quick success in the toppling of authoritarian leaders, brutally as in the case of Libya, and proved that they were mostly premature as in Egypt where the elected leaders were later toppled by a military coup. In each case, the uniqueness of the respective conditions altered not only the outcomes but also the reactions of international actors.

The Syrian case was thought to be a continuation of Arab Spring revolts, and it was assumed that their initial success would be replicated in Syria. However, the Syrian case displayed its uniqueness by refuting replicative attempts for the promotion of democracy, not only in the sense of underlying social conditions and structures but also in terms of the reactions and responses given by international and regional actors. In other words, the densely interdependent and interpenetrated nature of the Syrian dynamics proved itself with unleashing the unintended, unprecedented, and unexpected causal forces and consequences feeding the uncertainty of the environment.

The outcome of this uncertainty was implicated in the actors' inability to determine robust and precise end-states and, therefore, strategies. The involved actors identified conflicting and diverging end-states, and furthermore, the hesitation to allocate the necessary means to realize poorly defined end-states led to the escalation, and finally mutation of the protests into an uprising, a civil war, and eventually a proxy war. This, consequentially and inadvertently, brought about the direct engagement of the actors. Seen from the perspective of 2020, the mutation that was observed in the character of the conflict transformed the strategies and the responsive acts of these actors. Russia and Turkey experienced a similar fate. Their initial views on Syria have substantially transformed, bringing about oscillation and unprecedented tests.

How did Turkey and Russia perceive the Syrian crisis? Answering this basic question will broaden our discussion on the topic. The Turkish Foreign Policy (TFP) experienced a shift during the Justice and Development Party [Turkish: *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* (AK Party)]. The AK Party era saw attempts to broaden its reach through constructive relations and resolution of problems with its neighbors under the banner of "zero problems." The underlying motivation was to enlarge and diversify market reach for a growing economy and the creation of interdependencies that could gradually remove the strains on relations.² Liberal-oriented policies managed to get results in terms of a significant increase in Turkey's soft power,³ leading to this success being called a Turkish model, a blend of deepening democracy, a growing market economy, and constructive relations with both the West and

² Kemal Kirişçi, "The Transformation of Turkish Foreign Policy: The Rise of the Trading State" *New Perspectives on Turkey* 40, (2009): 29-57; Kemal Kirişçi and Neslihan Kaptanoğlu, "The Politics of Trade and Turkish Foreign Policy," *Middle Eastern Studies* 47, no.5, (2011): 705-724.

³ Tarık Oğuzlu, "Soft Power in Turkish Foreign Policy," *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 61, no. 1 (2007): 81-97; Meliha Benli Altunışık, "The Possibilities and Limits of Turkey's Soft Power in the Middle East," *Insight Turkey* 10, no. 2 (2008): 41-54.

the rest of the world, including Russia. This positive perception caused the model to be hailed as one that can be relied on to ensure similar economic success and political rise.

The Middle East region that had been neglected for long years in the past became one of the cornerstones of TFP in that period with increasing involvement. In that sense, it was a shift ending the long-lasting policy of non-involvement in the Middle East.⁴ However, this new activism also raised some concerns that mostly claimed that Turkey was revitalizing its imperialist policies in the post-Ottoman territories,⁵ or that Turkey was changing axis.⁶ Beyond those debates, the shift in TFP can also be perceived as an attempt to promote democracy in Arab Spring-swept territories, and an attempt to align foreign policy with the democracy demands of the respective societies and the Western partners, rather than supporting the authoritarian regimes at the expense of the democracy demands.⁷

The Syrian case was not an exception to the democracy promotion-oriented foreign policy, which was adopted with the Arab Spring. Turkey, with the Arab Spring, tried to lead democracy movements for the benefits of the societies, thanks to their receptiveness of Turkey as a source of inspiration for Middle Eastern societies and the popularity

⁴ Meliha Altunışık and L.G. Martin, "Making Sense of Turkish Foreign Policy in the Middle East under AKP," *Turkish Studies* 12, no.4, (2011): 569–587; Bülent Aras and Rabia Karakaya Polat, "Turkey and the Middle East: Frontiers of the New Geographic Imagination," *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 61, no.4, (2007): 471–488.

⁵ Cihan Tuğal, "Democratic Janissaries? Turkey's Role in the Arab Spring," *New Left Review*, 76, (2012): 5–24; Kerem Öktem, Ayşe Kadioğlu, and Mehmet Karlı, *Another Empire? A Decade of Turkey's Foreign Policy under the Justice and Development Party* (Istanbul: Istanbul Bilgi University Press, 2012); Alexander Morinson, "The Strategic Depth Doctrine of Turkish Foreign Policy," *Middle Eastern Studies* 42, no.6, (2006): 945, 964.

⁶ Tarık Oğuzlu, "The Middle Easternization of Turkey's Foreign Policy: Does Turkey Dissociate from the West?," *Turkish Studies* 9, no.1, (2008): 3–20; Ziya Öniş and Şühnaz Yılmaz, "Between Europeanization and Euro-Asianism: Foreign Policy Activism in Turkey during the AKP Era," *Turkish Studies* 10, no.1, (2009): 7–24.

⁷ Burhanettin Duran, "Understanding the AK Party's Identity Politics: A Civilizational Discourse and Its Limitations," *Insight Turkey* 15, no.1 (2013): 91–109.

of President Erdoğan.⁸ However, it can also be argued that an implicit realism was inherent beneath the policy of democracy promotion since the respective leaders were not always welcoming to the idea of sustaining good relations with Turkey. Probably, Turkey's primary misperception was based on the presumption that the democracy requests of societies cannot be disregarded, and as a rational inference, Turkey should stand by the people instead of by the authoritarian leaders. In other words, a rational and normative approach was driving the policy formation at the initial stage. Furthermore, Turkey, as a member of the Western world, presumed its allies would adopt a similar approach and take a firm stance in favor of the democracy movements. However, as would disappointingly be seen in the upcoming stages, the Western world's interests would outpace their values in defining approaches and policies towards the regimes.

When the protests against the Assad regime in Syria started, based on the good relations between the countries and most notably between Erdoğan and Assad, Turkey suggested to Assad to expand democratic freedoms in order to calm the situation instead of directly supporting the protesters or siding with the Western position. However, as Assad discounted the suggestions and began to adopt harsher measures, Turkey openly stated that the Syrian people would be favored if Turkey would be have to make a choice between people and leaders, signaling an open policy shift and divergence from Assad. However, the regime's brutal suppression of protestors vanished the support given to Assad, both by Turkey and the international community. In the Syrian conflict, Turkey became the vocal and major supporter of political change and democratization in the period of Arab revolutions.⁹ However, it

⁸ Alper Dede, "The Arab uprisings: Debating the Turkish Model", *Insight Turkey*, 13, no. 2 (2011): 23–32; Norman Stone, "This Spring Will Not Breed Any More Turkeys," *The Time*, April 5, 2011; Ziya Öniş, "Turkey and the Arab Revolutions: Boundaries of Regional Power Influence in a Turbulent Middle East," *Mediterranean Politics* 19, no.2, (2014): 203–219.

⁹ Ziya Öniş, "Turkey and the Arab Revolutions: Boundaries of Regional Power Influence in a Turbulent Middle East," *Mediterranean Politics* 19, no. 2, (2014): 203.

suddenly became counterproductive both for the Turkish model and undermined Turkey's image of a benign regional power.¹⁰

The Western attitude towards the protests was ambivalent, not only encouraging Assad to suppress the protests with gradual brutality but also increasing the ambiguity of their intentions regarding Syria. A couple of reasons played a significant role in this ambivalence. Firstly, the protests and democratization opened space for political Islam in the Arab territories, particularly with the rise to power of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt following the election of Mohamed Morsi. This revealed the difference in the interpretation of democracy and the democratization movements between the West and the Arab populations that were seeking political change. Secondly, partially related to the first, the rise of alternative and - for some - unwelcomed social segments to power disrupted the old economic interest-based connections and influence networks in those countries and thus increased the suspicion toward the new regimes.

Turkey felt that the U.S. was hesitant to express clearly its position and urge Assad to manage the protests in a softer way. Instead, Washington's ambivalence encouraged Assad to adopt incrementally escalating measures to deter and suppress the protesters. Such silence was followed by other major Western states as well. For instance, France's eagerness in Libya to intervene immediately was not observed for Syria. In fact, what was observed from international actors was inaction and replicated varieties of the same ambivalence rather than the promotion democratic values. The false expectations that Western states would deter Assad and support the democratization efforts of the Syrian people have not only contributed to the escalation of the conflict but also increased the embedded ambiguity on the ground, leading to mutation.

During the West's inconsistent stances towards the developments in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), Russian foreign policy

¹⁰ Ibid.

with Putin has identified regaining great power status as its ultimate goal. In an effort to assure this goal, Russia adopted a skeptical approach towards regime change attempts in Arab countries, mostly recalling the color revolutions in its near abroad. Instead of perceiving them as the outcomes of domestic socioeconomic and political dynamics, or as the internal generators of democracy demands, Russia opted to consider them as externally orchestrated and instigated.¹¹ In other words, Moscow perceived such democratic protests as not being internally generated from internal dynamics and contradictions but as externally manipulated occurrences. Relying on this belief, Putin's reactions were also formulated to halt manipulations by adopting a counterrevolutionary stance.¹² In Syria, Moscow adopted a similar stance to demonstrate the futility of U.S. efforts at regime change.¹³ In September 2011, Putin announced he would stand against the attempts toward regime change and replication of the Libyan scenario in Syria.¹⁴ The main drivers and explanations behind this positioning can vary, reflecting domestic and economic factors, but geostrategic ones seem to override the rest.

Syria stands as one of the rare countries that provide continuous strategic reach for Russia. Syria provides maritime reach, particularly via its primary reach to the Eastern Mediterranean, and its secondary reach to the Middle East and North Africa, facilitated by the Tartus naval base in Syria. In this manner it is one of the basic tenets of Russia's global strategy. In other words, Syria represents one of the core pillars of Russian geostrategic reach and, therefore, holds a critical position

¹¹ Pavel K. Baev, "Moscow Does Not Believe in Changes," in *The Arab Awakening*, edited by B. Jones and K.M. Pollack: 291-97. (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2011); Pavel K. Baev, "A Matrix for Post-Soviet 'Colour Revolutions': Exorcising the Devil from the Details" *International Area Studies Review* 14, no. 2 (Spring 2011): 3-22.

¹² Roland Dannreuther, "Russia and the Arab Spring: Supporting the Counter-Revolution," *Journal of European Integration* 37, no.1 (2015): 77-94.

¹³ Pavel K. Baev, "Russia as Opportunist or Spoiler in the Middle East?," *The International Spectator* 50, no.2 (2015): 8-21.

¹⁴ Roland Dannreuther, "Russia and the Arab Spring: Supporting the Counter-Revolution," *Journal of European Integration* 37, no.1 (2015): 77-94.

for the country's foreign policy. Moscow capitalized on Damascus's feeling of insecurity in the region, which was fueled by its growing divergence and isolation from the West. Any regime change and rule of a pro-Western leader would mean the loss of Russia's geostrategic reach, which is seen as instrumental in countering the U.S. in the Middle East and putting pressure on Turkey from the south. Even though, some analysts argue that Moscow has already lost its leverage on Damascus and this link simply constitutes a myth,¹⁵ the changing conditions of the conflict provided the pretexts to restore that leverage.

Beyond geostrategic thoughts, internal considerations also urged Russia to provide support to the Assad regime. With a considerable domestic Muslim population, Russia perceived Islamic radicalization as a threat to its internal stability, particularly in the Northern Caucasus¹⁶ due to the stereotypes of the Chechen Wars. With the outset of the Arab Spring, the strengthening and consolidation of extremism was increasingly becoming a factor of worry and potentially a force that could undermine stability.¹⁷ The spillover of extremism into Russia constituted one of the underlying drivers of Russian strategy formulation.

Russia showed a moderate stance in the early stages of the Arab Spring; however, the unilateral intervention of the West in Libya rang alarm bells in Moscow. Unlike Libya, the events in Tunisia and Egypt were not capable of dramatically disrupting Russian interests. Furthermore, from a domestic angle, the protests that swept Russia starting in December 2011 urged it to adopt a tougher stance towards such kind of protests.¹⁸

¹⁵ Dmitri Trenin, "The Mythical Alliance: Russia's Syria Policy," *Carnegie Papers* (Carnegie Moscow Centre, Feb. 2013): 19.

¹⁶ Dmitry Gorenburg, "Russia's Muslims a Growing Challenge for Moscow," *PONARS Policy Memo No. 421* (Harvard University, December 2006).

¹⁷ Roland Dannreuther, "Russia and the Arab Spring: Supporting the Counter-Revolution," *Journal of European Integration*, 37, no.1, (2015): 78.

¹⁸ Allison, R. "Russia and Syria: Explaining Alignment with a Regime in Crisis," *International Affairs* 89, no. 4 (July 2013): 795-823.

The actualization of this counterrevolutionary stance in the earlier stages was pursued with low-profile initiatives and actions, tailored opportunistically to exploit the vacuum rather than adopting an open adversarial, ambitious, and assertive stance. Western hesitance in Syria and eventual inaction also contributed toward acting in this manner. Instead of a direct approach laden with risks stemming from inherent uncertainty, an indirect strategic approach was preferred which was built upon a mindset premised on exploiting the weaknesses and vulnerabilities of the adversary. Then U.S. President Barack Obama's confusion and hesitance provided Putin numerous opportunities to exploit.¹⁹ It can be claimed that Russia's selective engagement strategy proved itself much more effective in thwarting U.S. strategy than Washington's selective engagement strategy to ensure their respective interests. To realize its objectives, Moscow initially preferred to provide diplomatic and economic support while, in parallel, cultivating a perception that escalation remains an option if necessary.

ESCALATION

The issue of what caused the escalation of the conflict to the extent of transforming the nature of the crisis can be explained by the conflict's fluctuating dynamics. It would not be wrong to suggest the growing uncertainty, awkward strategies, and hesitance to cope effectively with the crisis further exacerbated the situation, leading firstly to escalation and eventually to mutation. While being an outcome of incompatible policies of actors, once the escalation became a new reality, it led to the actors' strategic improvisation. Both Turkey and Russia adapted their strategies to the emerging realities on the ground and to the changing positions of other actors.

At the initial stage, Turkey adopted a cautious unilateralism towards the Arab Spring for the sake of not disrupting its already

¹⁹ Pavel K. Baev, "Russia as Opportunist or Spoiler in the Middle East?," *The International Spectator* 50, No.2 (2015): 19.

established interdependent relations with the ruling regimes.²⁰ However, Libya pushed Turkey to participate reluctantly in the international efforts recognizing that the uprisings would bring change and that the Western allies seemed determined to support them. However, with the growing confidence in the “Turkish Model,”²¹ Turkey adapted its policy to a unilateral pro-activism, presuming that the democratic regime changes might facilitate to build better relations with the elected governments.²² Ankara’s support to opposition movements came after the realization of the fact that they would be irreversible once launched and based on the assumption that the West would act along with the established concept of the “responsibility to protect,” both of which turned out to be major miscalculations on the behalf of Turkey.

Assad adopted an escalated crackdown strategy against the protestors and rebels and rejected any kind of suggestions to grant more freedom, therefore declining the democratic requests of diverse social segments of Syria. The increasing support towards the rebels led Assad to label them as “terrorists” which legitimized the use of force, though unilaterally. The major problem with his operational calculation to eliminate a terrorism threat stems from the indiscriminate use of force against the rebels, including civilians. In other words, the fact that the U.S. and Western redline was the use of chemical weapons and their subsequent inaction regarding the rest of the violence encouraged Assad to oppress the protests recklessly by conventional means. The inevitable outcome of this calculation was the enormous increase in the number of IDPs (Internally Displaced Persons). What was surprisingly observed was that conventional means succeeded in spreading more humanitarian suffering than chemical means. Therefore, inaction led

²⁰ Öniş, “Turkey and the Arab Spring”.

²¹ Cihan Tuğal, *The Fall of the Turkish Model: How the Arab Uprising Brought Down Islamic Liberalism*, (London: Verso, 2016).

²² Öniş, “Turkey and the Arab Spring”, 51.

to the failure of responsibility to protect because of the prioritization of national interests over ethical responsibilities.²³

The more striking questions then arises as to what caused the inaction, and what are the implications of that inaction. Different answers can be given to these questions, but the most prominent factors consist of the level of isolation of the regime, the regime's military preparedness and effectiveness, and their deeper interconnection with the diverse ethnic and sectarian structure of the Syrian society. The regime's survival was assured by the forces that are willing to keep the regime in power, which masqueraded Syria as non-isolated or the state as not depending merely on Western networks. In other words, the well-established links with non-Western states, and particularly with Iran and Russia, provided the means to mobilize counterrevolutionary forces. More importantly, the regime's supporters were much more determined to keep the regime in power than the actors who expected its toppling. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' (IRGC) involvement and support as a part of broader Iranian strategy not only promoted Iran as one of the major actors in Syria but also offered an invaluable foothold for future strategic encounters that could potentially constrain Israel in the Middle East. Out of this commitment, IRGC Commander Kasim Soleimani became a prominent figure that changed the direction of the crisis, leading him to be called the founder of the post-American Middle East.

The Syrian Armed Forces, though their effectiveness was questionable, were also a deterring factor that contributed to the hesitance of an open military intervention. Particularly the Syrian integrated air defense systems, which are concentrated in the western and southern parts of the country, probably deterred air operations with the exception of the less risky cruise missile attacks. In other words, the Syrian air defense system that protects Damascus ensured, or at least contrib-

²³ Justin Morris, "Libya and Syria: R2P and the Spectre of the Swinging Pendulum," *International Affairs* 89, no. 5, (2013): 1265-1283.

uted to, the regime's survival. Considered together with the ground operations which require extensive and continuous air support, the U.S. refrained or at least hesitated to adopt an assertive stance. This kept the U.S. military power out of the equation.

Secondly, after the protests turned into an uprising, Syria managed not to experience significant and massive defections from the army,²⁴ particularly with their weapons and equipment. This could have degraded its war-fighting capacity. Retaining war-fighting capability, the withdrawal of critical units from the east of the Euphrates, and the absence of massive aerial intervention on behalf of the opposition tipped the balance in favor of the regime, which, at the same time, was receiving extensive material support from its allies. In short, the loyalty in the Syrian army and the integrated air defense systems contributed to the hesitancy and inaction of the international community. Beyond military capacity and ability, the remaining Syrian Army's integrity was the reflection of Syrian ethnic and sectarian dynamics and the regime's firm grip on the military. A military intervention was also discounted with the fear of potentially triggering unintended outcomes, as seen in Iraq. The 2003 Iraq intervention triggered insurgency that was unprecedented at that time and fueled radicalization as an unintended consequence therefore laying the early seeds of DAESH.

Finally, Assad's strategy of transnationalizing the crisis also played an essential role in the escalation and eventually mutation of the conflict. The transnationalization of the Syrian crisis was undertaken in two directions. Firstly, through exporting the turmoil to the regional states as was seen vis-à-vis Turkey with the Reyhanli bombings on May 11, 2013,²⁵

²⁴ Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 126.

²⁵ "Syria Absolutely behind Reyhanlı Attack, Says Turkish Ministry," *Hurriyet Daily News*, April 4, 2014. <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/syria-absolutely-behind-reyhanli-attack-says-turkish-ministry-64634>; "Syria Denies Link to Turkey Car Bombs," *Al Jazeera*, May 12, 2013, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/europe/2013/05/2013511121047931174.html>; Erdem Güneş, "Death Toll Rises to 50 as Explosions Hit Turkish Town on Border with Syria," *Hurriyet Daily News*, May 11, 2013; "Reyhanli Bombings Death Toll Reaches 52," *Hurriyet Daily News*, May 27, 2013.

and secondly, by importing support from its backers, namely Russia and Iran. The attack followed similar but smaller bombings and mortar shelling in the same area in the several months leading up to it.²⁶ It was perceived as an attempt to weaken internal tensions through externalizing the conflict with a spillover strategy, which was also observed with the withdrawal of the regime forces from the east of Euphrates in July 2012, thus opening space for the PKK offshoot, the PYD/YPG.

This strategy was tailored to achieve two main objectives. The first objective was to concentrate the forces around the capitol and western strip from north to the south, where the major opposition and rebellious threat had emanated, and where Assad thought the major rivalry would take place.²⁷ However, this would strike back with the loss of control in one-third of the country. The second major objective was to put pressure on Turkey, which together with the West supports the opposition. In this way, Assad not only created a threat for Turkey through spillover but also aimed to trigger a divergence within the Western bloc, given that the PYD/YPG was a vital card that could be used against Turkey. Assad's presumption would prove itself correct when the coalition forces began to support the PYD/YPG/PKK instead of the moderate opposition, and thus neglected Turkey's concerns. In fact, the inaction and finally the withdrawal of Western support to the opposition created a mood of betrayal between the rebels and fueled the radicalization of certain of their segments.²⁸ In other words, the U.S. policy was far from providing game-changing material support to the opposition and implementing a consistent strategy that could prevent the escalation. Instead, it delivered support that was just

²⁶ "Blast Kills Dozens in Turkish Town Reyhanli on Syria Border," *BBC News*, May 11, 2013.

²⁷ Atilla Sandıklı and Ali Semin, "Bütün Boyutlarıyla Suriye Krizi ve Türkiye," *Bilgesam Report No.52*, (November 2012), 8.

²⁸ Ufuk Ulutaş, Kılıç Buğra Kanat and Can Acun, "Sınırları Aşan Kriz Suriye," *SETA Report*, March 25, 2015, 1-40; Lina Khatib, Tim Eaton, Haid Haid, Ibrahim Hamidi, Bassma Kodmani, Christopher Phillips, Neil Quilliam, and Lina Sinjab, *Western Policy Towards Syria: Applying Lessons Learned*, (London: Chatham House, March 2017), 21-25.

adequate to keep the opposition alive.²⁹ Therefore, the United States' inaction provided the ground for demographic changes in the country, let the conflict escalate, and brought about the inevitable spillover. In that sense, Assad's strategy was effective in terms of both marginalizing Turkey and fragmenting the Western bloc's support to the opposition, while further increasing ambiguity and adding new variables to inaction. For example, the downing of an unarmed Turkish jet fighter in June 2012, which was undertaking a reconnaissance mission in the Eastern Mediterranean, further exacerbated – beyond rhetoric – the West's decisiveness in urging Assad to step down.

Russia's position was more complicated than that of Iran. However, Moscow, too, supported the regime from behind by delivering necessary equipment and by selectively engaging in halting the limited Western actions and thus constraining their effectiveness. Russian support in the early stages focused on providing diplomatic and covert military support to the regime. The driving rationale behind acting in this way was briefly explained above. The ways in which Russia offered support in substantial terms should be explained in depth. By countering regime change efforts through democratic movements and the consequential disruptions of well-established links, Russia already made clear its position in the Syrian case. However, its strategy followed a low-profile, covert, and diplomatic style. In February 2012, Russia and China used their veto power to block the UN Security Council's condemnation of the attacks on civilians in Homs and the resolution that demanded the Syrian government's compliance with the Arab League's plans. Thus, Russia and China provided a diplomatic coverage and prevented an international reaction.³⁰ The diplomatic backing strategy meant blocking collective international action under the concept of the

²⁹ Bassma Kodmani, "Syrian Voices on the Syrian Conflict: A Solution for Syria," *NOREF Expert Analysis*, May 2015, <http://noref.no/Regions/Middle-East-and-North-Africa/Syria/Publications/A-solution-for-Syria>.

³⁰ Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 92.

responsibility to protect. In other words, Russia removed the possibility to legitimize the use of force against Assad.

However, Western diplomatic efforts to unite the opposition against Assad continued. The Syrian National Coalition was established in November 2012. However, they could not manage to resolve the significant differences among them despite the fact that the efforts of the West had not faded away entirely at that time. On the diplomatic front, the UN announced the Geneva Communiqué to resolve the tensions between the opposition and the regime. Even though Russia declared its support and took part in the discussions, its counterrevolutionary position caused vague results. Apart from the Russian diplomatic support in obstructing the efforts, Moscow continued to provide military support to the regime, while Iran had already intervened on the ground. At that time, according to certain estimates, 10% of Russia's global arms sales went to Syria, with estimated contracts worth \$1.5 billion.³¹ The main implication of this support was that Moscow was keeping up the regime's war-fighting capability.

MUTATION

What caused the mutation of the Syrian crisis eventually into a civil war or a proxy war? The question of mutation, the changing in the nature of the conflict, relies on a couple of factors including the increased level of uncertainty that constantly feeds itself and discourages the actors' promptness. The inevitable outcome of the inherent uncertainty was to turn the promptness and hesitance in decision-making, with the corresponding implications, into a process of territorialization of threats. As a matter of fact, the chain of events and their causal sequence brought about unintended consequences to which the actors responded with increasingly diverging behaviors.

³¹ Richard Galpin, "Russian Arms Shipments Bolster Syria's Embattled Assad," *BBC*, January 30, 2012, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-16797818>

PROMPTNESS VS. HESITANCE

During the incrementally increasing violence that was being observed in the conflict, the West hesitated to react promptly and to push for Assad's resignation. On the contrary, the West had shown hesitance, betraying the values it represents. There are several reasons for the West's hesitance and subsequent low-profile reactions to the violence. Behind the decisions to act hesitantly, the uncertainty on the ground and the domestic concerns of the EU, just recovering from the 2008 economic crisis, played a determining role. In fact, the 2008 economic crisis also hit the Arab societies by creating disenchantment towards the authoritarian regimes and therefore augmented the increasing demand for change. On the other hand, the EU increasingly adopted a more pragmatist approach to the authoritarian regimes, thus diverging their outlook on the events. It can be suggested that the 2008 economic crisis undermined the West's democracy and liberal-oriented foreign policies, replacing them with more interest-based foreign policies. The fundamental dilemma can probably be put as the Europeanization of MENA societies and the Middle Easternization of Europe. The significant outcome of this dilemma and transformation of outlook became apparent with the Arab Spring. In fact, with the Arab Spring, liberal-based, soft-power driven, and ethics-oriented politics transformed into realist-based (even *realpolitik*-based), hard power-driven, and interest-oriented politics.

Assad's violent crackdown strategy was also creating anxiety in the West. After a while, the futile attempts to diffuse and calm the situation in Syria, and upon the growing criticism from the ground and media, Obama felt compelled to stress his stance on the Assad regime. In the aftermath of the erupted protests, on May 19, 2011, Obama showed appreciation for the democracy demands of the Syrian people by stating, "The Syrian people have shown their courage in demanding a transition to democracy. President Assad now has a choice: He can lead that transi-

tion, or get out of the way.”³² It seemed that the West was supporting the demands for democracy of the people and disapproving of their brutal suppression in Syria. However, since there were no signs of calming steps, instead, Assad preferred to escalate his crackdown strategy, thus moving beyond cooperative rhetoric. As a reaction, the executive order, on April 29, 2011, launching targeted sanctions against the regime, was perceived as a positive step in the way of promptness. However, the sanctions targeted his inner circle rather than Assad himself.³³ These mistargeted sanctions on human rights abuses and violations instead of discouraging Assad, emboldened him to adopt harsher measures to suppress the uprising. Finally, on August 18, 2011, Obama stated, “We have consistently said that President Assad must lead a democratic transition or get out of the way. He has not led. For the sake of the Syrian people, the time has come for President Assad to step aside.”³⁴ This statement was criticized as staying on the rhetorical level in the hope of staying on the right side of events, and as merely disapproving of the violence³⁵ instead of being the outcome of a comprehensive policy-planning process.³⁶

This increasing rhetoric kept alive the hopes of approaching Western intervention for the rebels while emboldening the regime and regional actors to adopt more decisive acts. In fact, it was clarifying and solidifying the lines around Assad, instead of peeling off the support given to him. However, an expectation based on wishful thinking, the hope that the Assad regime would collapse, or the inadequate reporting

³² Barack Obama: “Remarks by the President on the Middle East and North Africa,” *The White House Office of the Press Secretary*, May 19, 2011, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/05/19/remarks-president-middle-east-and-north-africa%20>.

³³ “Obama Signs New Sanctions against Syria,” *The Huffington Post*, June 29, 2011, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/04/29/obama-sanctions-syria_n_855593.html.

³⁴ Barack Obama, “Statement by President Obama on the Situation in Syria,” *The White House Office of the Press Secretary*, April 18, 2011, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/08/18/statement-president-obama-situation-syria>.

³⁵ “President Obama’s Statement on Syria,” *The New York Times*, August 18, 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/19/world/middleeast/19Obama-Statement-on-Syria.html>.

³⁶ Kiliç Buğra Kanat, *A Tale of Four Augusts: Obama’s Syria Policy*, (Istanbul: SETA Publications, 2015), 12.

on the true nature of the developments was shaping the narratives and actions.³⁷ While this naivety or ambiguity was overriding the reality on the ground, there were reports that warned that the inner circle was “remaining steadfast” with no inclination to defection despite the fact that the sanctions were also targeting them.³⁸ The inner circle was also showing no signs of fracturing.³⁹

The economic sanctions that were imposed by the U.S. and the EU at the time while pushing Syria closer to Iran and Russia, as its determined financial supporters, provided Assad - as he sought to circumvent the sanctions - with the pretext to harden his circle and ensure the support of the business elites with the exception of insignificant numbers that distanced themselves.⁴⁰ Sanctions have created suffering and economic setbacks on Syrian society - but not on the regime - since nearly 40 percent of the oil was being exported to the EU.⁴¹ The economic suffering rather than spurring the speeding up of protests provided a pretext for Assad to blame the West for the developments with the hope of inciting nationalist sentiments and overcoming the fractures in society. In other words, apart from exploiting the West’s softer moves, the regime capitalized on them to convince the protestors, which was seen as the masses had been ‘duped’ into occupying the streets.⁴²

³⁷ Ibid., 106-109.

³⁸ Gret Miller and Daren De Young, “Syria’s Bashar al-Assad Firmly in Control, U.S. Intelligence Officials Say,” *The Washington Post*, March 9, 2012, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/syrias-bashar-al-assad-firmly-in-control-us-intelligence-officials-say/2012/03/09/gIQAv7r71R_print.html.

³⁹ Barbara Starr and Jamie Crawford, “U.S. Sees ‘No Fracturing of Assad Regime,’” *CNN*, March 1, 2012, <http://security.blogs.cnn.com/2012/03/01/u-s-sees-no-fracturing-of-assad-regime/>.

⁴⁰ Samer Abboud, “The Economics of War and Peace in Syria,” *The Century Foundation*, January 31, 2017, <https://tcf.org/content/report/economics-war-peace-syria/>.

⁴¹ Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, 87.

⁴² “Syria’s President Assad Vows to Defeat ‘Plot,’” *BBC*, March 30, 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-12904156>.

The first serious expectation of military intervention came after the use of chemical weapons. Even though the first attack was reported in November 2012, it failed to garner a substantial reaction from the U.S. that could change the pace of developments, therefore deterring the regime from using them further.⁴³ Following the use of chemical weapons in Ghouta, Obama condemned and warned, “We have been very clear to the Assad regime... that a red line for us is when we start seeing a whole bunch of chemical weapons moving around or being utilized. That would change my calculus... That would change my equation... We have put together a range of contingency plans.”⁴⁴ Obama’s words, the tone, and narration of the situation was interpreted as a sign that the U.S. was finally prepared to eliminate the gap between words and deeds, therefore adopting a more decisive stance towards the regime. However, the U.S. military posturing was too far back to follow up on the statement, which proved it was unable to deter the Assad regime from utilizing such weapons.⁴⁵ Even though the U.S. had realized that a change in Assad’s behavior could only be assured through becoming more assertive, hesitation once more overrode calculus. And Moscow did not miss the opportunity to increase its involvement in the Syrian crisis.

The United States’ hesitance became apparent when it called off a military strike against the regime following the use of chemical weapons in the Ghouta region of Damascus in 2013. Washington believed

⁴³ Robert Johnson and Geoffrey Ingersoll, “Poison Gas Bombs’ in Syria Could Force US Intervention,” *Business Insider*, December 24, 2012, <http://www.businessinsider.com/assad-report-edly-using-chemical-weapons-homs-syria-rebels-2012-12>.

⁴⁴ James Ball, “Obama Issues Syria a ‘Red Line’ Warning on Chemical Weapons,” *The Washington Post*, August 20, 2012, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/obama-issues-syria-red-line-warning-on-chemical-weapons/2012/08/20/ba5d26ec-caf7-11e1-b811-09036bcb182b_story.html; Claudette Roulo, “Little: Syrian Chemical Weapons Appear Secure,” *Department of Defense News*, July 13, 2012, <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=117118>; “Hillary Clinton on Syria: Use of Chemical Weapons Is a Red Line – Video,” *The Guardian*, August 11, 2012, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/video/2012/aug/11/hillary-clinton-syria-chemical-weapons-video>.

⁴⁵ Kanat, *A Tale of Four Augusts*, 12.

that it was a better option to resolve the chemical weapons debate, thus avoiding dragging the U.S. into the Syrian quagmire. Furthermore, Obama's interests in reaching a deal with Iran on constraining the nuclear program was suspected of playing a significant role in his hesitance.⁴⁶ Nonetheless, the declared objective was partially achieved by not allowing the regime to outweigh redlines through diplomatic efforts. This created repercussions on the mutation of the conflict. The acceptance of the Russian offer to remove chemical weapon stockpiles not only showed and fed the promptness of Moscow with timely involvements but also emboldened Assad's friends to be more assertive on the ground while causing a feeling of betrayal on the rebels. By not enforcing its "redline" and by delegating it to an international organization, the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) with the endorsement of the UNSC on September 27, 2013, the United States in fact recognized the Russian role in Syria and opened space for its further assertiveness. Even though the U.S. succeeded in maintaining the integrity of its redline by the elimination of the chemical weapons' threat, it generated many implications. Apart from the proliferation of state actors that became involved, it allowed the rise of new dynamics on the ground either by triggering the radicalization of certain segments of the opposition, thus further fracturing it, or by laying down the conditions for mutation.

It can be suggested that the U.S. deal with Russia profoundly altered the course of developments. This decision by the international community legitimized the regime by granting it the responsibility of undertaking the disarmament process, thus giving a message that it was still being recognized as the ultimate authority in the country, and endorsing the use of conventional means to suppress the uprising. Assad effectively used this opportunity to increase the regime's attack on

⁴⁶ Pamela Engel, "Obama Reportedly Declined to Enforce the Red Line in Syria After Iran Threatened to Back out of Nuclear Deal," *Business Insider UK*, 23 August 2016, <http://uk.businessinsider.com/obama-red-line-syria-iran-2016-8>.

civilians through conventional weapons, while destroying the chemical weapons. The decision was perceived as a green light to continue its operations.⁴⁷ In fact, the nature of the deal and the message it delivered, with the reaffirmed hesitance, to Assad was criticized by David Rothkopf with the words, “We don’t care so much if you kill your people. We primarily care *how* you kill your people.”⁴⁸

As the regime’s confidence increased, understanding that the West would not intervene and could not constrain the activities of its allies, apart from increasing the violence on the ground, convinced Assad to act reluctantly on the diplomatic front. In other words, beyond a blind eye to its violence, it encouraged Assad to drag his feet to the diplomatic initiatives, turning the efforts into futile endeavors. To the criticisms of inaction and redlines, Obama ironically reacted by stating that “I did not set the redline. The world did.”⁴⁹ The Obama administration, with blind eyes to the atrocities on the ground and deaf ears to the warnings about the growing humanitarian crisis, insisted on pushing for a multilateral and diplomatic approach to curtail and resolve the conflict.⁵⁰ The outcome of this inaction was the radicalization of certain factions of the opposition and the territorialization of terrorist threats.

THE TERRITORIALIZATION OF THREATS

The mutation of the Syrian crisis showed itself with outright and significant developments, which can be conceived as the territorialization of terrorist threats. Their most notable implications were observed in the involved parties’ actions. The territorialization of threats initiated the

⁴⁷ Kanat, *A Tale of Four Augusts*, 156.

⁴⁸ David Rothkopf, “Too Little, Too Late,” *Foreign Policy*, August 27, 2013, <http://foreign-policy.com/2013/08/27/too-little-too-late/>.

⁴⁹ Dan Roberts, “Obama Seeks Global Backing on Syria: ‘I Did Not Set a Red Line. The World Did,’” *The Guardian*, September 4, 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/sep/04/obama-syria-red-line-chemical-weapons>.

⁵⁰ Josh Rogin, “Obama Stifled Hillary’s Syria Plans and Ignored Her Iraq Warnings for Years,” *The Daily Beast*, August 14, 2014, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/08/14/obama-stifled-hillary-s-syria-plans-and-ignored-her-iraq-warnings-for-years.html>.

divergence in the strategic outlooks and security concerns of the actors. The radicalization of certain factions of the opposition in Syria, which created fertile ground for the rise of DAESH and other radical groups, and the changing nature of the Kurdish opposition with the involvement of the PKK through the PYD/YPG to fight against DAESH, not only increased the already existing ambiguity on the ground, but it also changed the character of conflict - if not the war. In this process, predominantly two variables played a determining role: the shifts in territorial control with its embedded uncertainty and the use of proxies to realize strategic ends.

In the mutation of the conflict, the inaction of the Obama administration to deter the Assad regime from violently suppressing the rebels and its hesitance to provide support to protestors to defend themselves against the atrocities created an environment that was conducive to expanding their agencies. In the absence of suppressing dynamics or fear that could curb their atrocities, the unobservable dynamics found a permissive environment that created non-state armed groups which eventually chose to gain and expand territories for the sake of laying the ground for future statehood ambitions.

THE SYRIAN OPPOSITION

When the protests started in March 2011, and Assad began violently suppressing the protestors, defected army officers and the population formed defensive armed groups. The organization of those scattered groups under an overarching organization was managed in late July with the foundation of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) in Turkey. They gained some significance in late September. However, in time, the FSA looked like a looser overarching organization rather than a tight hierarchical organization like the PYD/YPG.⁵¹ Other groups also flourished facing Assad's violence. Ethnic, sectarian, and nationalist sentiments

⁵¹ Aron Lund, "Free Syrian Army Does Not Exist," *Syria Comment*, March 16, 2013, <https://www.joshualandis.com/the-free-syrian-army-doesnt-exist/>.

drove their formation and, eventually, their objectives against the regime. The militarization of these groups reflected the diversity and lack of collective and coordinated action. As one commentator put it, “Syria’s revolutionaries did not make a formal collective decision to pick up arms – quite the opposite; rather, a million individual decisions were made under fire.”⁵² However, instead of uniting against Assad, lack of leadership and embedded social diversity along with lack of coherence within the Western supporters left them scattered. In that sense, it was not possible to talk about a monolithic structure of opposition.⁵³

The fractured nature of the opposition with diverse interests, and hence strategic ends, and mutability of allegiances not only continuously fed uncertainty, but also discouraged the decisiveness for prompted action from external powers, leaving them ambiguous in their actions. Nevertheless, they gained some support from international and regional actors for toppling the Assad regime. The groups also tried to transform into a united whole representing the diversity of the Syrian social segments with the formation of the Syrian National Council (SNC) in October 2011. The creation of the SNC was considered an essential step toward building a united political front against the regime. Right after the formation, and before gaining a strong support from the ground, they tried to gain international support. They pursued a moderate approach on the ground by mainly carrying out civil disobedience, instead of an outright armed opposition. Adopting a top-down approach, gaining international support and becoming competent in Syria, and seeking international support caused the loss of leverage over society since they could not guarantee the basic security needs of the population who they claimed to represent.

The hesitance and eventual inaction mutated the opposition forces. The ineffectiveness of the Obama administration to support the opposi-

⁵² Robin Yassin-Kassab and Leila Al-Shami, *Burning Country: Syrians in Revolution and War* (London: Pluto Press, 2016), 79.

⁵³ Lina Khatib et al., *Western Policy Towards Syria*, 13.

tion for a variety of reasons stemming mainly from ambiguity and subsequent miscalculations such as the oversimplification of the situation and exaggerated fears, revived radicalization. In other words, the fear that support might end up in the wrong hands, multiplied the wrong hands on the ground. The moderate opposition, supporting cooperation and coordinated action with the West, lost its trust in Western supporters; hence, the groups willing to accommodate the moderate opposition began to shift their allegiances towards more radicalized groups.⁵⁴ Notably, after the redline failure, some of the moderate opposition groups slipped into the radical fronts, whose anti-Western narrative responded to their feeling of betrayal and who provided basic economic needs.

At the end, despite some early attempts to turn the FSA into a challenge against Assad, the Western hesitance to fund, train, and equip it undermined its effectiveness or the likelihood it would become a formidable opposition that could push Assad to accommodate. On the other hand, Turkey's support to the FSA, despite being targeted with fierce criticism from the West that claimed Turkey was supporting radical groups, in fact, prevented the radicalization of the core FSA, which carried out a transformation towards a nationalist and reformist orientation instead of towards radicalization.

The regime also pursued an effective information operation against the West, playing on their fears of radicalism. With the escalation of the uprising and in order to prevent the formation of more unified groups and to prevent Western involvement from supporting them, Assad claimed he is the only viable alternative for suppressing radical dynamics on the ground. He reminded the West of the previous failed military interventions: "Do you want to see another Afghanistan, or tens of Afghanistans?"⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, 185.

⁵⁵ Quoted in Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, 131, from Micheal Weiss and Hassan Hassan, *ISIL: Inside The Army of Terror*, (New York: Regan Arts, 2015).

The radicalization on the ground particularly with the creation of extremist groups such as *Jabhat al-Nusra* in January 2012, not only fueled the hesitance of the U.S. by proving its concerns about how material support might end up in wrong hands, but also legitimized Assad's violence against that groups since the West feared radicalism more than Assad. In fact, the hesitance and the abandonment of support to moderates emboldened both the radicals and Assad.⁵⁶ Its fears caused the West to neglect its values regarding the humanitarian aspects of the conflict and to tacitly approve Assad's rule irrespective of the humanitarian crises he caused and would cause. The Pentagon refrained from a military intervention that would accelerate Assad's removal, which was thought would create a power vacuum.⁵⁷ General Dempsey's iterations to Congress that his removal would manifest a strengthening of Al-Qaida and its affiliates prove how the fear of radicalization inadvertently contributed to its expansion and deepening.⁵⁸

When Obama finally started to support the vetted moderate opposition it was too late since the radicalization had already produced its ramifications, which were capable of changing the nature of the conflict.⁵⁹ The fault lines had already become apparent even when the program of vetting the FSA elements had started.⁶⁰ The inevitable outcome was the deprivation of power for the moderate opposition that could have forced Assad to step down, and the consequential and final split into different factions, some of which preferred radicalization and fighting their own wars. Assad, on the other hand, with the support

⁵⁶ Lina Khatib et al., *Western Policy Towards Syria*, 20.

⁵⁷ Adam Entous and Nour Malas, "U.S. Still Has Not Armed Syrian Rebels," *The Wall Street Journal*, September 2, 2013, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/us-still-hasnt-armed-syrian-rebels-1378165592>.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Josh Rogin, "Obama's Syria Aid: Too Late?," *The Daily Beast*, June 13, 2013, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/obamas-syria-aid-too-late>.

⁶⁰ Charles Lister, *The Free Syrian Army: A Decentralized Insurgent Brand* (Analysis Paper, Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2016): 1–7.

of Russia and Iran, reorganized his forces and began to consolidate his power through consecutive battlefield successes.

THE RISE OF DAESH

The rise of DAESH was the most significant outcome of the radicalization process. ISIL was established in April 2013; however, its early roots had flourished in Iraq under the banner of the Islamic State of Iraq, particularly in the aftermath of the 2003 U.S. intervention, and gained pace with the rapid withdrawal of troops in the Obama period. The Syrian crisis, Western inaction, and Maliki's sectarian policies of Sunni marginalization in Iraq prepared and fed the dynamics to give it a new impetus beyond creating a suitable environment to expand.

The radicalization and subsequent polarization of Syrian society, as discussed above, had created fertile ground for terrorist organizations to emerge and to expand within a very short period of time.⁶¹ Despite the fact that some early religious groups were established such as the Islamic Front, none of them was perceived as a direct threat beyond creating concerns about their anti-American and anti-Western perspectives, except al-Nusra.⁶² Their ability to territorialize determined the calculus of threat perception in Washington, since territorialization would mean growing resilience and materialization of ideology into action and would make it more visible to the world as a sign of Western failure against another extremism terrorism evolution after Al-Qaida.

After its establishment, ISIL showed its effectiveness with the capture of Raqqa from al-Nusra in August 2013 and expanded into al-Bab, Deir al-Zor, Abu-Kamal, and Azaz in September 2013. This relatively quick advance on different fronts should have raised concerns about the true nature of the threat, and how imminent and

⁶¹ Michael R. Gordon and Mark Mazzetti, "U.S. Spy Chief Says Assad Has Strengthened His Hold on Power," *The New York Times*, February 4, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/05/world/middleeast/us-representative-to-syrian-opposition-is-retiring.html?_r=0.

⁶² Kanat, *A Tale of Four Augusts*, 157.

disruptive it might be. However, it did not. On the contrary, when asked about DAESH, Obama said, “The analogy we use around here sometimes, and I think is accurate, is if a jayvee [Junior Varsity] team puts on Lakers uniforms that does not make them Kobe Bryant... I think there is a distinction between the capacity and reach of a bin Laden and a network that is actively planning major terrorist plots against the homeland versus jihadists who are engaged in various local power struggles and disputes, often sectarian.”⁶³ This oversimplification and underestimation,⁶⁴ after the inaction, has encouraged DAESH to be more assertive, and produce more disruptive impacts on regional dynamics.

Following their rapid advance on different fronts, ISIL declared a caliphate in June 2014. This was an attempt to transform their territorial advances into political outcomes. Notably, the capture of Mosul, within a relatively short period of time in June 2014, showed the extent of ISIL’s operational effectiveness while shedding doubt on the effectiveness of U.S. intelligence exposing how the uncertainty succeeded in deceiving those involved in intelligence production and decision-making processes. The value of Mosul for ISIL stemmed from its available resources that could be mobilized for its war machine, thus making ISIL a key player both in Iraq and Syria. In particular, the rapid surrender of the Iraqi forces, without fighting, left large numbers of military equipment behind and provided what was needed for the mobilization of ISIL. There were lots of reasons behind this withdrawal without fighting. Al Maliki’s sectarian policies had distanced Sunnis in the Armed Forces, who felt resentment for their marginalization. However, beyond sectarianism,

⁶³ Remnick, “Going the Distance: On and off the Road with Barack Obama,” *The New Yorker*, January 20, 2014, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/01/27/going-the-distance-david-remnick>.

⁶⁴ Siobhan Gorman and Julian E. Barnes, “U.S. Underestimated Urgency of Islamic State Threat in Iraq,” *The Wall Street Journal*, August 10, 2014, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-spies-missed-urgency-of-islamic-state-threat-in-iraq-1407717475>.

the soldiers were aware of what DAESH was. The U.S. intervention in 2003 and the subsequent measures taken for the disbandment and the de-Baathification of the Iraqi army left imprints on society. Particularly, the de-Baathification law promulgated by Paul Bremer left army officers jobless overnight. They were barred from employment in government agencies and refused pensions, but they were allowed to keep their weapons.⁶⁵ The early withdrawal of American troops left behind a power vacuum that was filled by forces that were thought to have been eliminated but which were determined to regain and rerun the country.

Secondly, quick advances and territorialization had created the required circumstances to keep the resourcing required for mobilization at certain levels and to create the capacity that was needed. In other words, their strategic calculi, defined as ideological ends, were fed by material resources gained through expansion and adherence - to the extent of attracting foreign fighters who felt resentment for social and economic inequalities and ignored in their home countries. In other words, DAESH managed to create a cause to adhere to, namely, strategic ends and employable means. Apart from military equipment and recruitment, they also managed to create a war economy for themselves out of the oil-rich regions. Their territorial advances enlarged their economy and therefore their fighting capacity.

The capture of Mosul triggered paramount changes in the approaches of international powers to the threats. In the very least, beyond proving that DAESH was not a 'jayvee team,' it showed how the underestimation, ambiguity, and territorialization of threats might alter the calculus of actions.

⁶⁵ Liz Sly, "The Hidden Hand behind the Islamic State Militants? Saddam Hussein's," *The Washington Post*, April 4, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/the-hidden-hand-behind-the-islamic-state-militants-saddam-husseins/2015/04/04/aa97676c-cc32-11e4-8730-4f473416e759_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.7e27ca591289; Liz Sly, "How Saddam Hussein's Former Military Officers and Spies Are Controlling the ISIS," *Independent*, April 5, 2015.

THE RISE OF THE PYD/YPG

The rise of the PYD/YPG with the territorialization in northern Syrian concerned Ankara as the rise of ISIL had concerned Washington and Moscow. This does not mean that the rise of ISIL did not create anxiety in Ankara; however, the priorities and strategic ends in the Syrian conflict dramatically altered, reflecting their utmost security concerns and interests. The advance and rise of the PYD/YPG out of the Syrian power vacuum dramatically altered the calculus of action in Ankara since it was another kind of territorialization of threats that was to drive the nature of acts of Turkey.

When the Syria uprising started, the Kurdish population of Syria preferred to stay away from the protests although they were one of the ethnic groups that were frustrated by the Baathist regime's repressive policies. However, Assad's move to withdraw the Syrian army from the northeastern parts of Syria, not only appeased them and alleviated their reactions and their eventual participation to the opposition lines determined to overthrow the regime. It also provided space for them to organize themselves for the next phases of the crisis and to pursue a wait-and-see strategy in order to capitalize opportunistically from the developments. It has already been discussed how Assad used this withdrawal to facilitate the spillover of the conflict by withdrawing his troops from the Kurdish-populated areas. Assad also initiated and facilitated the process in June 2011 by freeing 1,500 PYD militants from prisons and granting citizenship to individuals who were not accepted as citizens before.⁶⁶ On the other hand, besides shaping their approach to the uprising, it increased the rift with the opposition by adding a new dynamic that fueled the mutation of the conflict.

After the withdrawal of the regime, the PYD/YPG, an offshoot of the PKK, entered the process of territorialization relying on the already existing dynamics of the region that played a significant role in the

⁶⁶ Can Acun and Bünyamin Keskin, "PKK'nın Kuzey Suriye Örgütlenmesi: PYD-YPG," SETA Report, (2017), https://setav.org/assets/uploads/2017/05/PYD_YPG_Tr.pdf.

organizational evolution of the higher echelons of the PKK.⁶⁷ PKK leader Murat Karayılan's earlier statement had warned PKK terrorists to be ready for the upcoming events which were seen as a historical opportunity for the pro-PYD/YPG Kurds.⁶⁸ With the implications of the conducive environment and Assad's withdrawal, the PYD/YPG tried to capitalize from the Syrian War, from the very beginning, as a way of gaining agency and becoming an actor.⁶⁹ Despite the fact that a more inclusive, moderate, and successful Kurdish bloc was formed in October 2011 under the name Kurdish National Council, the PYD declined to join and preferred to pursue a different and unilateral strategy that is more closely aligned to the PKK than the Kurdish Regional Government in Iraq led by Barzani.⁷⁰ Given the soured relationship between the PKK and Barzani, and the fact that the PYD as an organization was originally formed by Syrian Kurds returning from fighting alongside the PKK,⁷¹ this divergence did not come as a surprise. During the Qamishli protests on November 12, 2012, the narratives used, such as "neither Damascus nor FSA" or "the regime will topple in Damascus not in Serekani [Ras al-Ayn]" clarified the PYD's strategy.⁷² This has not only brought to the surface the differences between Barzani and the PYD but also disturbed Turkey and Arab opposition groups, leading them to accuse the PYD of acting in cooperation with Assad.⁷³

The messages of Ocalan, jailed in Turkey, dated October 4, 2012, were transmitted by his lawyers. He urged the formation of a

⁶⁷ Bill Bowring, "Türkiye Kürtleri: Bir Azınlığın Haklarını Savunma," in *Ortadoğu'da Azınlıklar*, (ed.) Kirsten E. Schulze, Martin Stokes, and Clom Campbell, (trans.) Kenan Kalyon, (Istanbul: Torem Yayıncılık, 2006), 44.

⁶⁸ "Karayılan'dan Suriye'deki Kürt Muhalefetine Önemli Mesajlar", *ANF*, November 20, 2011.

⁶⁹ Shelly Culbertson, *The Fires of Spring: The Post-Arab Spring Journey through the Turbulent New Middle East* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2016), 95.

⁷⁰ Harriet Allsopp, *Kurds of Syria* (London, I.B.Tauris, 2014), 196-205, 214.

⁷¹ Jordi Tejel, "Syria's Kurds: Troubled Past, Uncertain Future," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, October 16, 2012.

⁷² Hasan Cemal, "Suriye Kürtlerinin 'Güç' Savaşı!," *Milliyet*, November 18, 2012.

⁷³ Allsopp, *Kurds of Syria*, 205.

15,000-fighter-strong force and to follow a “third way” strategy, which defined the PYD/YPG’s approach to the developments in Syria.⁷⁴ The PYD strictly aligned with the PKK and opted to follow this third way strategy with the discourse of “neither regime nor opposition”⁷⁵ which gave them the chance to exploit every opportunity in their interests. This strategy and Assad’s withdrawal of forces facilitated becoming an actor without facing any substantial objection. However, when the great Damascus attack was launched on July 18, 2012, one day later, on July 19, the PYD announced the process of cantonization in northern Syria. Their conflict with the Free Syrian Army in Ras al-Ayn on November 21, 2012, contributed to the PYD/YPG’s confidence to act unilaterally. The conflicts in Aleppo’s Kurdish-populated Sheikh Makhsut and Eshrefiye on February 11, 2013 with the Syrian regime and their eventual success furthered their confidence since the conflicts demonstrated that the PYD/YPG could ostensibly fight against a state’s conventional army.⁷⁶ Apart from testing their fighting capability, their capture of Rumeylan on March 3, 2013, provided the PYD/YPG economic access to oil-rich regions and transportation corridors. This advance showcased how committed they are to gaining economic resources to sustain their agency, which started with the capture of the Hasakah oilfields, the largest in Syria, in 2012. The EU’s decision to lift the oil embargo on Syria, permitting Europeans to buy crude oil from the opposition, opened the channels of financing for the PYD/YPG and, therefore, both confirmed their strategy and contributed implicitly to the increase of their war-fighting capability.

On the political aspect, they focused more on their internal organization by establishing governance that should typically be undertaken

⁷⁴ Loveday Morris, “Syria’s Kurds Prepare for Life After Assad,” *Financial Times*, October 2, 2012, <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/707b7fa8-0bf2-11e2-8e06-00144feabdc0.html#axzz40MzXzTTP>.

⁷⁵ Cemal, “Suriye Kürtlerinin ‘Güç’ Savaşı!”

⁷⁶ Charles R. Lister, *The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda, The Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 95.

by state authorities. Unlike the opposition in Syria, the PYD/YPG managed to establish links with society or managed to project that image mostly by applying suppressive measures on the societies of the regions they controlled. In that way, they prepared for the second round, which would come with the rise of ISIL. Clearly, instead of seeking international support, the PYD/YPG sought the opportunities to create de facto realities on the ground by forcing the local population to migrate. In this manner they practiced demographic engineering, while engaging international actors. Gülten Kışanak, a member of the Turkish parliament for the Peoples' Democratic Party (Halkların Demokratik Partisi-HDP), which could not manage to denounce its links to the PKK, visited Washington on the occasion of the opening of the PYD Bureau in the U.S. capital on August 2, 2012. The interconnectedness of the dynamics of Syria and Turkey became explicit with her visit and the tone of narratives adopted by the HDP's Kurdish parliamentarians. The most significant development was the declaration of was the declaration of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (NES), also known as Rojava, on November 12, 2013, which raised eyebrows and rang alarm bells in Ankara. The declaration of 'Rojava' was an attempt on the road to gaining autonomy from the Syrian regime, irrespective of who rules the country and how they rule it.

The PYD/YPG owes this expansion to the power vacuum in the country and their ability to utilize that vacuum for their cause, which is defined by Öcalan's strategy of a third way, while being heavily supported by many Western states and especially the United States. Assad's initial strategy and intent to cause a spillover of the conflict can be seen as a marriage of convenience rather than approval or acceptance of the PYD/YPG's goal of political decentralization.⁷⁷ However, the developments on the ground followed a different direction. Not only did the PYD/YPG come out from the power vacuum as an actor,

⁷⁷ Lina Khatib et al., *Western Policy Towards Syria*, 8.

but other non-state actors gained enough agency to follow their own strategies and objectives. The successes of the PYD/YPG allowed the PKK to re-enter Syria, where it was isolated since 1998 with the Adana Accords. In that sense, the territorialization is regarded as an indispensable part of their strategy, particularly in the aftermath of the security paranoia that appeared with the Adana Accords in 1998 and the trauma being created on the Kurds by Assad before the uprisings. The fundamental question for them was what would happen if Damascus and Ankara reach an accord again? This paranoia, in fact, led the PYD to be more pragmatic and opportunistic in its policies, and as a result to become a proxy.



TWO

ACTS – IMPLICATIONS,
CHANGE,
AND ENGAGEMENT



IMPLICATIONS OF TERRITORIALIZATION: DIVERGING END-STATES, CHANGING STRATEGIES

The most significant impact of the mutation of the conflict was the territorialization of non-state actors, and the threats they posed to the state actors or the threats that they perceived they posed. The inevitable outcome of this mutation and territorialization was observed in the behaviors of state actors. This process started to emerge with the escalation and uncertainty being created both on the ground and in the perceptions of the actors. At the initial stages, with the exception of Russia and Iran that firmly supported the regime, the West and particularly the U.S. showed hesitance which encouraged non-state actors to pursue their objectives. Meanwhile, the opposition either felt betrayed or discouraged by the lack of support and the hesitance, and lost sight of its cause for a democratic transition of Syria.

Before the mutation, the opposition and the West supported the regime change and seemed to show a consensus on preventing the regime's atrocities towards its people. However, the territorialization of threats, particularly the rise of DAESH, brought about the subordination of regime change to the defeat of DAESH and the reversion of its territorialization. Therefore, a divergence from the initial, mostly converged, and agreed end-state started to surface. The divergence was the outcome, as stated above, of the divergence on the pre-eminence of threats. This was an inevitable outcome since each divergence on end-states is prone to produce divergence of acts, which tend to be defined in line with the defined end-states. The severe changes in threat

perceptions made significant changes in end-states, which can be seen as rational. However, this does not mean they didn't create ramifications on the ground. The most significant one was the intensification of involvement and engagement of actors with diverging agendas and conflicting end-states.

One of the most significant ramifications of the territorialization of threats and fluctuations in territorial control was the transformation of the narratives utilized in the Syrian War. At the outset of the uprising, democracy-oriented and humanitarian narratives were being broadcasted to support the opposition. However, with the mutation of the conflict, a counterterrorism narrative of a different kind started overwhelmingly to dominate the discursive domain. In other words, the humanitarian and democratic discourse left its place to the counterterrorism discourse. However, the disagreements on the prioritization and the divergence of the definition of terrorist groups caused a divergence in the acts of state actors. The counterterrorism narrative emerged as the driving force of U.S. involvement, while Russia utilized a similar narrative to legitimize its strategy change and intervention. Turkey, too, engaged directly with military means in the Syrian crisis after its soured relations with the U.S. in order to curb the increasing threats caused by the territorialization of both ISIL and the PYD/YPG.

THE TERRITORIALIZATION OF DAESH, STRATEGY CHANGE, AND THE U.S. ENGAGEMENT

The DAESH advance and its territorialization particularly after the capture of Mosul in June 2014, signified another stage of ISIL's evolution. The declaration of the caliphate in July 2014 was perceived as a step in transforming this territorialization into a form of statehood. After capturing Mosul, ISIL headed towards and laid siege on Erbil, which prompted the U.S. to protect its servicemen and civilians in the city. However, the U.S. decision was validated in the aftermath of the

beheading of two American journalists in August 2014. Threatening the U.S. existence in Erbil and the open violence against American journalists caused Washington to acknowledge that the U.S. interests and forces were endangered by the ISIL threat and eventually led President Obama to authorize airstrikes. Later on, Obama announced the need to form a coalition against DAESH. The two shocking events, the rise and rapid advance on the ground, and the brutal beheading of two American journalists, undoubtedly pushed the U.S. to shift its strategy. It can be claimed that the U.S. inaction triggered the process of radicalization and created a power vacuum that eventually pulled Washington inadvertently into the problem and steered the transformation of its strategy. In other words, once territorialized, the non-state actors began to determine the behaviors of state actors - even the ones that were not willing to become involved.

The advances of DAESH were not limited to Iraq. In Syria, too, they managed to advance rapidly and to set new realities on the ground. ISIL captured Raqqah from al-Nusra in August 2013 and in the following month, they advanced to al-Bab, Azaz, Deir al-Zor, and Abu Kamal. The most significant advance was the capture of Ayn al-Arab (Kobane) from al-Nusra in July 2013 by the PYD/YPG. This marked the PYD/YPG's stepping in, followed by the removal of DAESH from Ras al-Ayn in Hasakah province. These advances encouraged the PYD/YPG to act more independently and proved its third way strategy was more effective in terms of acquiring agency and attracting Western attention. Particularly the al-Nusra assault in Tal Abyad in August 2013 and its atrocities attracted Western attention to the region and to the PKK-affiliated, non-state actor PYD/YPG. After the declaration of 'Rojava' in 2013, they transformed their image as a fighter group that fights against radical opposition groups in Syria to a source of legitimacy.

The mutation of the conflict and eventual radicalization caused the polarization of the opposition groups. While the moderate opposition was peeling off to radicals and thus losing its legitimacy,

the PKK-affiliated PYD/YPG's image was gaining legitimacy thanks to the threats posed by DAESH and their inescapable fighting against it and other radical groups for their own objective of territorialization. With the violence they faced, they received enormous international coverage, and the West remembered the humanitarian aspects of the war and the consequences of inaction. In fact, the PYD/YPG and the regime succeeded in playing into the West's fears of radical groups. In Salih Muslim's words, "The PYD has the same enemy as the West, and both the West and the Kurds are fighting jihadists... I want the American public and the entire world to know that we are trying to stop these jihadist groups, and we want them to stand with us. These people attack innocent civilians, and kill children, women, and old people simply because they are Kurds."⁷⁸ Two points deserve to be highlighted in this statement. First, it clearly reveals how the PYD/YPG was successful in acting on Western fears of radicalism. The more striking second aspect is how Salih Muslim distorted the picture by portraying the PYD/YPG as the saviors of Kurds. By advertising the PYD/YPG as a legitimate group that fights for the Kurds, Salih Muslim initiated the legitimization process of the PYD/YPG in the eyes of the West. The rise and the rapid advance of DAESH also contributed to its changing image. The two factors, namely shifting legitimacy and growing extremist threats, determined not only the end-states of the Western states and the perception of the crisis but also caused a change in their calculus of involvement.

Obama inevitably formulated a strategy with an end-state of "degrade and destroy" ISIL "so that it's no longer a threat, not just to

⁷⁸ Quoted in Berkan Ögür and Zana Baykal, "Understanding 'Foreign Policy' of the PYD/YPG as a Non-State Actor in Syria and Beyond" in *Non-State Armed Actors in the Middle East: Geopolitics, Ideology, and Strategy* (eds.) Murat Yeşiltaş and Tuncay Kardaş (Palgrave Macmillan: Cham, Switzerland, 2018), 66 from Mutlu Çiviroğlu, M. "PYD's Salih Muslim: We Are Awaiting an Invitation for Talks with Washington," *Rudaw*, August 16, 2013, <http://rudaw.net/english/interview/16082013>.

Iraq but also to the region and to the United States.”⁷⁹ The new strategy included four tenets defined as the use of airstrikes against terrorist groups, supporting the groups fighting against DAESH on the ground, increasing counterterrorism capabilities to thwart DAESH attacks, and providing humanitarian assistance to displaced persons by DAESH attacks.⁸⁰

The execution phase of this strategy was staged both in Iraq and Syria. Erbil and besieged Yezidis in Sinjar enacted the U.S. to engage in airpower by bombing the ISIL positions in Sinjar and Erbil on August 7, 2014. On television, Obama stated that the prevention of the Yezidi massacre constitutes a justification for the use of force. DAESH’s advance to Erbil and the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) were treated similarly, but his time strategic concerns overrode humanitarian ones. However, the double standards on the justification of the use of force for humanitarian reasons, which differed in Ghouta and Sinjar, contributed to the doubts on what actually triggers U.S. military action and gave rise to the question of whether the U.S. acts on humanitarian concerns or on realist interests. Following the DAESH assault on Ayn al-Arab in September 2014 the U.S. expanded its airstrikes to Syria on 22 September 2014 and to Ayn al-Arab on 27 September.

Regarding the second tenet of the strategy supporting the opposition, the U.S. enacted the train-and-equip program, and asked \$500 million for the program which was to be allocated to the fighters of the Syrian opposition to fight against ISIL. The program foresaw the training and equipment of 5,000 recruits by the end of 2015.⁸¹ However, the moderate opposition, in the mood of betrayal created by the

⁷⁹ Julie Hirschfeld Davis, “After Beheading of Steven Sotloff, Obama Pledges to Punish ISIS,” *The New York Times*, September 3, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/04/world/middleeast/steven-sotloff-isis-execution.html?_r=1.

⁸⁰ Barack Obama, “Statement by the President on ISIL,” *Office of the White House Press Secretary*, September 10, 2014, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/10/statement-president-isil-1>.

⁸¹ Ed Payne, “Pentagon: U.S. to Begin to Train and Equip Moderate Syria Rebels,” *CNN*, January 16, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/01/16/us/syria-rebel-training/>.

strategy of inaction was reluctant this time to align with Washington and to fight their cause. Furthermore, the available opposition in terms of numbers had already shrunk with the radicalization of segments of that opposition into the radical groups that had managed to address the needs of society and to perform a sort of governance. Nevertheless, the training would be kicked off by the U.S. and Turkish military personnel⁸² in the camps in Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Qatar.⁸³ The details and review of the program were discussed in a phone call by Obama and Erdoğan, and in particular the vetting process for the fighters.⁸⁴ Even though the program initiated with the recognition that “strategically, there are limits to how much you can accomplish with airstrikes,”⁸⁵ the inability to find eligible fighters that could be vetted and the rapid failure of the trained ones, who left behind their weaponry to al-Nusra, raised concerns about the success of the program.⁸⁶ Eventually, the program was shelved in the fall of 2015.⁸⁷

In terms of the program’s implications, apart from marking a significant change in U.S. strategy in Syria, it was perceived as the emergence of the dual-track policy. The first track was focused on the elimination of DAESH and the second track focused on the

⁸² Phil Steward and Tom Perry, “Pentagon to Deploy 400 Troops to Train Syrian Rebels,” *Reuters*, January 19, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-usa-idUSKBN0K-P0FO20150116>.

⁸³ Burak Ege Bekdil, “Turkey, U.S. Set Plan to Train Syrian Rebels,” *Defense News*, March 31, 2015, <http://www.defensenews.com/story/defense/policy-budget/warfare/2015/03/31/tur-key-syria-rebels-isis-joint-train-border-no-fly/70740010/>.

⁸⁴ “Readout of the President’s Call with President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan of Turkey,” *Office of the White House Press Secretary*, March 26, 2015, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/03/26/readout-president-s-call-president-recep-tayyip-erdogan-turkey>.

⁸⁵ Kevin Baron, “Airstrikes Not Enough to Defeat ISIL, Hagel Says,” *Defense One*, August 21, 2014, <http://www.defenseone.com/threats/2014/08/airstrikes-not-enough-defeat-isis-hagel-says/92153/>.

⁸⁶ Yeganeh Torbati, “U.S.-Trained Syrian Rebels Gave Equipment to Nusra: U.S. Military,” *Reuters*, September 24, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-usa-equipment-idUSKCN0RP2HO20150925>.

⁸⁷ Michael D. Shear, Helene Cooper, and Eric Schmitt, “Obama Administration Ends Effort to Train Syrians to Combat ISIS,” *The New York Times*, October 9, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/10/world/middleeast/pentagon-program-islamic-state-syria.html?_r=0.

broader dimensions of the civil war, including the removal of the Assad regime by training the moderate opposition. Despite seeming like a comprehensive strategy at initial glance, the failure of the train-and-equip program and the discounting of other opposition groups with the excuse of radicalization, combined with the reluctance and failure of the opposition in war fighting, showed how the strategy was founded upon an understanding of selective engagement. In other words, the defeat of ISIL was prioritized over the removal of Assad.⁸⁸ The opposition perceived the ISIL-first strategy as a neglect or tacit approval of the regime's barrel-bomb attacks, confirming their reluctance to cooperate and pushing them to radicalize further.⁸⁹ Seeing that the humanitarian concerns are conditioned on the convergence of interests, the internal social dynamics also began to deteriorate, and in particular led to a polarization between the Arab and Kurds. The latter added a new dimension to the already existing social grievances or further deepened the already existing ones.⁹⁰ The neglect of the moderate opposition eventually encouraged the PYD/YPG's fight against those moderate groups.⁹¹ From the perspective of the PYD/YPG, these growing grievances were neglected since they would be a new factor that would support their claims of autonomy during the future political resolution phase of the war. In other words, the selective engagement strategy and prioritization of one sort of threat over others rather than decreasing or resolving the already mutated threat, caused further mutation with its distinctive implications, each factor adding new unknowns to the already existing ambiguity.

From a strategic perspective, the territorialization of threats and terrorism by DAESH had already triggered a substantial transforma-

⁸⁸ Kanat, *A Tale of Four Augusts*, 183.

⁸⁹ Lina Khatib et al., *Western Policy Towards Syria*, 27.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

tion of the U.S. strategy in Syria. In effect, the non-state actors began to strain the relations between Turkey and the U.S., particularly with the support given to the PYD/YPG. One of the main reasons for this preference and eventual burgeoning of U.S.-PYD relations was the initial strategy of the PYD/YPG to follow a third way strategy, focused on benefitting from the civil war to advance their autonomy. In order to acquire Western and U.S. support and given that the advance of DAESH posed a risk to their gains, it accepted to act as the proxy ground forces of the U.S. strategy, which would eventually mean the flow of a vast amount of military equipment and substantial support to realize their end-states. Aron Lund, a U.S. commentator a Swedish writer on Middle Eastern affairs, went as far as to comment, “the United States Air Force has transformed itself into something that more closely resembles the Western Kurdistan Air Force.”⁹²

Beyond the extensive support given to the PYD/YPG, which is directly connected to the PKK terrorist organization, the pressure on Turkey and accusations that Turkey had effectively supported ISIL also spoiled the relations. The claims that Turkey had supported DAESH will be discussed in Chapter 3. However, in the end, to diffuse international pressure and accusations, to lessen the influence of the PYD/YPG on the ground, and to curtail its growing strength spilling over into Turkey as terrorist acts, Turkey reluctantly joined the coalition.⁹³ However, Turkey’s growing distrust for Washington did not disappear.

DE-TERRITORIALIZATION OF THE REGIME, STRATEGIC CHANGE, AND RUSSIAN INVOLVEMENT

The question of what prompted Russia to change its strategy cannot merely be explained with the conditions on the ground. Answering

⁹² Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, 211.

⁹³ Lina Khatib, et al., *Western Policy Towards Syria*, 28.

these questions requires looking closer to the changing dynamics on the ground, and on regional and international conditions.

On the ground, the regime lost its operational tempo against the opposition both in the directions of north and south. In the north, the Jaysh al-Fateh captured Jisr al-Shughour and Idlib in March-April 2015. The loss of Idlib signified the changing balance in favor of the opposition groups that contain radical elements. The opposition also advanced in Daraa, pushing the regime forces back, which were comparatively moderate compared to the more radical ones in the north. Upon those failures, Assad, for the first time, admitted that the regime was experiencing “setbacks” on the ground and began to complain about the “manpower shortage.”⁹⁴ The operational outcome of these factors was the withdrawal of forces in line with the operational priorities, leaving vacuums behind to be filled by eager non-state actors. Out of these compelled trade-offs and the regime’s inability to allocate the needed military power to control regions, DAESH advanced and captured Palmyra in May 2015. The regime’s territorial losses in all directions gave rise to the question whether the Assad regime was collapsing and leaving its place to the radical and terrorist groups. In other words, the prolongation of the civil war and its eventual mutation caused the regime’s attrition. The fall of Idlib and the attrition of the Syrian Army opened the way to Latakia, where Russia had a naval base with broader geostrategic interests.

The extensive U.S. support to the PYD/YPG and the attempts to control the Syrian Kurds, which historically were under greater Russian influence and had better relations with the latter, was perceived by Moscow as a loss of another leverage that could be utilized in case relations with Turkey deteriorate. Although the regime had withdrawn from Kurdish-populated areas, its unexpected and sustained expansion was perceived as threatening to the territorial integrity of Syria, and

⁹⁴ “Assad Admits “Setbacks” in War against Syrian Rebels,” *Al Jazeera*, May 6, 2015, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/05/150506185408811.html>.

for the economic viability of the regime in the post-conflict Syria. The U.S. support and the PYD/YPG's advance towards the Eastern Mediterranean and the capture of the oil fields raised concerns not only in Damascus but also in Moscow. In other words, Russia thought of the territorialization of non-state actors as a factor that could trigger the direct military engagement of regional actors, most notably Turkey, which was considered detrimental to the regime survival and the continuation of Moscow's geostrategic interests. This pushed Russia to change its strategy and step up its engagement. Therefore, both to balance the U.S. engagement in the region and to constrain or at least deter the involvement of other actors, Moscow inadvertently was compelled to engage in Syria directly.

It can be suggested that the U.S. engagement brought about the inevitable engagement of Russia. As discussed earlier, Russia pursued a stance supporting the regime change and put enormous effort to prevent the U.S. military action in Syria. Russia was countering the U.S. inaction through actions on the diplomatic front. However, once the U.S. involvement turned out to be a military engagement, Russia, too, responded in a replicative way. It can also be suggested that as the uncertainty of the conflict diffused, and the stakes became apparent, the international actors preferred to engage directly to guarantee and protect their relative gains and interests.

Assad's statements of "manpower shortage" and "setbacks" were made as a "plea for help."⁹⁵ Being already in covert support of the regime, Russia, with this plea, found the ground to elevate its engagement starting in August 2015. It should also be noted that Russia, too, was hesitant regarding its form of support, specifically about being more assertive and overt in its engagement. Kasim Soleimani's visit to Moscow eased doubts and hesitance, and paved Russia's open en-

⁹⁵ Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, 217.

gement.⁹⁶ Relying on the Russian government website, the media reported that the agreement signed on August 12 allowed Moscow to deploy troops in Syria. The conditions agreed or dictated to the regime, which had limited options to survive, read, “Russian military personnel and shipments can pass in and out of Syria at will and are not subject to controls by Syrian authorities.... Syrians cannot enter Russian bases without Russia’s permission. And Russia disclaims any responsibility for damage caused by its activities inside Syria.”⁹⁷ As can easily be understood from the clauses, Moscow managed to reach an agreement that was quite liberal allowing “an open-ended commitment to its military deployment in Syria.”⁹⁸ Furthermore, Russia immediately started its overhaul, allowing its extensive airstrikes to be conducted in the immediate aftermath of acquiring basing rights from Assad at Khmeimim Air Base.

The initial U.S. reaction was surprise and the critiques were directed to the Obama administration, pointing out that Russia is replicating Crimea in Syria, and that Washington was unaware of Russian moves on the ground.⁹⁹ After Crimea and with the subsequent sanctions, the West was reluctant to believe that Russia would launch another military intervention in Syria. However, the airstrikes conducted starting on September 30, 2015, showed how the ambiguity on the ground distorted the perceptions and caused them to build groundless expecta-

⁹⁶ Laila Bassam and Tom Perry, “How Iranian General Plotted Out Syrian Assault in Moscow,” *Reuters*, October 6, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-soleimani-insigh-idUSKCN0S02BV20151006>; Dimitri Trenin, *What is Russia up to in the Middle East?* (Cambridge: Polity, 2018), 58.

⁹⁷ Michael Birnbaum, “The Secret Pact between Russia and Syria That Gives Moscow Carte Blanche,” *The Washington Post*, January 15, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/world-views/wp/2016/01/15/the-secret-pact-between-russia-and-syria-that-gives-moscow-carte-blanche/>.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ “Congress Reportedly Investigating Possible Intel Lapses over Russian Presence in Syria,” *Fox News*, October 8, 2015, <http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2015/10/08/congress-reportedly-investigating-intel-lapses-over-russia-in-syria-as-nato.html>.

tions.¹⁰⁰ On the American side, before Russia expanded its presence in Syria, the U.S. expressed its concerns about Russian intentions on September 5 in a phone call between Kerry and Lavrov, and warned that Russian intervention might deteriorate the situation on the ground, particularly highlighting the possible confrontation between Russia and the coalition regardless of the mandate Moscow was to acquire from Damascus.¹⁰¹

The reflection of this agreement on the ground was the direct air-power support to the Assad regime replicating the support given by the U.S. to the PYD/YPG. Furthermore, both have utilized similar discourse to legitimize their engagement. What is observed was the response developed to counter U.S. strategy founded upon the excuse of the territorialization of threats with a replicated rhetoric – counter-terrorism – and utilization of similar means – airpower – to alter the balance on the ground and ensure diverging end-states. Even though Russia preferred to deny the reports and downplay its commitment to military assistance for humanitarian purposes,¹⁰² later on, Russia admitted and portrayed its involvement as a “legitimate and legal” against ISIL. Claiming its existence as legitimate and legal, which was formally requested by the sovereign government of Syria, Russia, at the same time, implicitly questioned the legitimacy of Western engagements and denounced their existence. On the other hand, the U.S. Secretary of Defense Carter criticized Russia, stating that Rus-

¹⁰⁰ Michael Gordon and Eric Schmitt, “Russian Moves in Syria Pose Concerns for U.S.,” *The New York Times*, September 4, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/05/world/middleeast/russian-moves-in-syria-pose-concerns-for-us.html?_r=0

¹⁰¹ “Readout of Secretary Kerry’s Call with Foreign Minister Lavrov,” *Office of the U.S. Department of State Spokesperson*, September 5, 2015, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2015/09/246664.htm>.

¹⁰² Simon Tomlinson, Will Stewart, and Jenny Stanton, “What Is Russia Sending to Syria? Moscow Admits Delivering ‘Military Supplies but no Extra Troops’ to Assad – As U.S. Warns Build-up Compares to Putin’s Incursion in Crimea,” *Daily Mail*, September 10, 2015, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3229223/Just-Russia-sending-Syria-Moscow-admits-delivering-military-supplies-Assad-dodges-claims-Putin-deploying-extra-ground-troops.html>.

sia “pouring gasoline on the Islamic State phenomenon.”¹⁰³ Carter’s words show how the two were positioned at irreconcilable poles while utilizing the same rhetoric.

The materialization of the Russian strategy change became apparent when the Russian General arrived at the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad to inform the U.S. authorities stating that “Russian air strikes on targets across Syria would commence in one hour... for the safety of all concerned, it would be better if the U.S. Air Force stayed out of the way and suspended its bombing campaign in Syria.”¹⁰⁴ The tone of the words and the way the message was delivered, as reported, demonstrates how determined Russians were in their commitments. This is despite the fact that at first glance it sounds as an act of seeking deconfliction in order to prevent any undesired confrontations. Upon the materialization of the commitment, the U.S. rather than openly reacting to Russia, opted to limit the possible disruptive impacts of Russian involvement on the U.S. operations by keeping the “open lines of communication with Russia on deconflicting.”¹⁰⁵

Seeking ways of deconfliction can be seen as the de facto acceptance of Russian existence in Syria. In fact, the U.S. administration had decided not to confront Moscow directly based on a miscalculation that the operations would create more burdens than benefits for Moscow. They even assumed the Syrian intervention would turn

¹⁰³ Guy Taylor, “Ashton Carter: Russian Buildup in Syria Could ‘Pour Gasoline’ on ISIS,” *The Washington Times*, September 24, 2015, <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2015/sep/24/carter-russian-buildup-syria-could-pour-gas-isis/>.

¹⁰⁴ Roland Oliphant, Harriet Alexander, David Blair, “Russian General Tells U.S. Diplomats: ‘We Launch Syria Air Strikes in One Hour. Stay out of the Way,’” *The Telegraph*, September 30, 2015, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/11902275/Russian-general-tells-US-diplomats-We-launch-Syria-air-strikes-in-one-hour.-Stay-out-of-the-way.html>.

¹⁰⁵ “Pentagon to Open ‘Lines of Communication’ with Russia over Strikes in Syria,” *Russia Today*, September 29, 2015, <https://www.rt.com/news/316987-pentagon-russia-communications-syria/>.

into a kind of quagmire for Russia.¹⁰⁶ In terms of how uncertainty on the ground had distorted the possible outcomes and its implications for the parties eventually became evident, but this time altering the initial context, degrading the ability of the parties to develop robust strategies, and complicating the conditions by adding unpredictable variables to be taken into account in future endeavors. Washington positioned itself upon the miscalculation of how far Russia was willing and determined to protect the regime, upon the underestimation of Russian capabilities to project its power beyond its near abroad, and the expectation that Russia would ultimately fail to support the regime and its engagement would be counterproductive thus eroding Moscow's broader geopolitical interests. In other words, the administration's overconfidence led to the presumption that the Russian intervention was "doomed to fail."¹⁰⁷

Showing the expectations were unfounded, Russia, in fact, once more succeeded in creating a de facto situation by applying its military muscles. Obama tried to defer Moscow by stating that "this is not some superpower chessboard contest.... Mr. Putin had to go into Syria not out of strength but out of weakness, because his client, Mr. Assad, was crumbling."¹⁰⁸ However, Russia, seeing the hesitance and receptiveness of the U.S., decided to intensify airstrikes starting on September 30 on targets in the regions of Homs, Hama, and Quneitra, reaching thereafter 6,000 sorties within four months of commencement. Moscow, by directly supporting the regime, not only prevented its collapse and increased its prospects, thus narrowing the options for regional actors

¹⁰⁶ Karin DeYoung, Juliet Eilperin, and Greg Miller, "U.S. Will Not Directly Confront Russia in Syria, Obama Says," *The Washington Post*, October 2, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/2015/10/02/44c1f7fc-6932-11e5-9223-70cb36460919_story.html.

¹⁰⁷ Lisa Ferdinando, "Carter: Russia "Doomed to Fail" in Syria; ISIL Must Be Defeated," *DoD News*, October 30, 2015, <http://www.defense.gov/News-Article-View/Article/626828/carter-russia-doomed-to-fail-in-syria-isil-must-be-defeated>.

¹⁰⁸ Karin DeYoung et al, "U.S. Will Not Directly Confront Russia in Syria, Obama Says."

like Turkey and the U.S., but also provided a new operational impetus to ensure and widen the regime control in Syria. A report from the Institute for the Study of War concluded that the regime offensives in the countryside of Aleppo, Hama, and Latakia had started the attrition of the opposition and marginalized the moderate elements of opposition by targeting moderate, U.S.-backed TOW anti-tank missile recipients.¹⁰⁹ Furthermore, Russia managed to disrupt American plans in Syria by endangering Washington's covert operations, and even managed "peeling off parts of the opposition"¹¹⁰ favoring the regime. This led to an admission that "the Americans do not do as much as the Russians do for their side of the conflict."¹¹¹ It was reported that Russians tried to convince the opposition that they would support them forever and that they would not leave them on their own like their old friends had done. The report also revealed the broader intent of Moscow. "The secret outreach shows that as it works to muscle the U.S. out of Syria, Russia isn't just bombing the U.S.'s current and former rebel allies — it's also working to co-opt them, launching a shadowy campaign that seeks to highlight U.S. weakness in Syria."¹¹²

The reactions from the U.S. administration were behind the realities of the ground when Obama stated that "[e]ventually Syria will fall, the Assad regime will fall, and we have to have somebody who we're working with that we can help pick up the pieces and stitch back together a cohesive, coherent country."¹¹³ However, later on, the statements by

¹⁰⁹ Genevieve Casagrande, "Russian Airstrikes in Syria: September 20 - October 20, 2015," *Institute for the Study of War*, October 21, 2015, <http://www.understandingwar.org/back-grounder/russian-airstrikes-syria-september-30-october-20-2015>.

¹¹⁰ Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, 218.

¹¹¹ Karin DeYoung et al., "U.S. Will Not Directly Confront Russia in Syria, Obama Says".

¹¹² Mike Giglio, "Russia Is Recruiting the U.S.'s Rebel Allies in Syria," BuzzFeed, June 9, 2016, https://www.buzzfeed.com/mikegiglio/russia-is-recruiting-the-uss-rebel-allies-in-syria?utm_term=.ixKxebMBZk#.nxMx3JMLQW.

¹¹³ Barack Obama, "Press Conference by the President," *White House Office of the Press Secretary*, October 2, 2015, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/10/02/press-conference-president>.

General Dunford, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, admitted that the “balance of forces” in Syria had shifted in favor of Assad.¹¹⁴

In fact, beyond providing support to the Assad regime, which was on the verge of collapse and tipping the balance, and therefore moving away from a stalemate and Assad’s gradual attrition, the airstrikes leveled Russia as an indispensable actor and party of the Syrian War. Russia with its military engagement strategy, revised its strategy into a more assertive one. Moscow’s strategy change has produced broader implications in different domains. Most significantly, it materialized the change in the grand-strategic thought of Russia. Russia, which was considered more focused on its “near abroad” with Syria, broadened its engagement to the “far abroad.”¹¹⁵ The Crimean case was a Russian intervention in its near abroad; however, Moscow expanded its reach with Syria and for the first time after the Cold War deployed the Russian military outside the self-declared post-Soviet spaces, preferring to adopt a more assertive stance towards the U.S. In fact, in February 2016, Fawaz Gerges interpreted the Russian intervention as a game-changer in Syria.¹¹⁶

What has Russia introduced with this strategy change? What are the implications of strategy change? Those questions require to delve into a more detailed analysis of the strategy change in terms of ramifications and implications. Essentially, in the Syrian domain, Moscow employed the military to ensure its strategic end-state, defined as keeping the regime in power and preventing a regime change that could eradicate the remaining military bases in the Mediterranean and the Middle East. In fact, similar to Turkey’s involvement in the Middle East, Moscow ex-

¹¹⁴ Terri Moon Crong, “Carter Outlines Strategy to Counter ISIL at Senate Armed Services Hearing,” *DoD News*, October 27, 2015, <http://www.defense.gov/News-Article-View/Article/626113/carter-outlines-strategy-to-counter-isil-at-senate-armed-services-hearing>.

¹¹⁵ Hasan Yukselen, “Russian Grand Strategy: From ‘Near Abroad’ to ‘Far Abroad,’” *Dış Politika-Foreign Policy: Journal of Foreign Policy Institute* 45, no.1 (2018): 35-50, <http://foreignpolicy.org.tr/foreign-policy-20181/>.

¹¹⁶ Fawaz A Gerges, “Syria War: Tide Turns Assad’s Way amid Ceasefire Push,” *BBC News*, February 13, 2016, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-35562943>.

perienced a Middle Easternization of its foreign policy. The significant difference is the broader gains of the latter from this Middle Easternization. The geostrategic value of the Syrian regime for Russia has already been discussed above. It can be suggested that the Russian involvement has not changed in character, but the possible gains have increased with this strategy change. In other words, Russia managed to raise its potential gains, thus invalidating the opposite expectations from other actors. Then, the question is how this was achieved.

Russia initially preferred to pursue a counter-revolutionary stance. Whenever the conflict mutated, the U.S. hesitance left its place to intervention, and the regime attrition became evident; similar to Washington, Moscow too increased its hand and employed similar means to realize its end-states. Moscow initially countered Western attempts toward regime change on the diplomatic front supported by extensive military support to the regime tailored to sustain its war-fighting capacity against the rebels. The delivery diplomacy under the contracts reached \$1.5 billion in early 2012, comprising 10 percent of Russian global arms sales, discounting the criticisms raised from the West and Arab nations arguing that the sales were violating any existing embargoes.¹¹⁷ Upon the aired criticisms after the military intervention, even Russia, in the words of Lavrov, stated that Moscow “has never concealed that it delivers military equipment to official Syrian authorities with the aim of combating terrorism.”¹¹⁸

The arms deliveries in the early stages included refurbished MI-25 helicopter gunships, and reportedly also the SA-17 Buk-M2 air defense system, the Bastion coastal defense missile system, and a Yak-130 combat jet trainer.¹¹⁹ Besides equipping the regime, Moscow provided

¹¹⁷ Richard Galpin, “Russian Arms Shipments Bolster Syria’s Embattled Assad,” *BBC News*, January 10, 2012, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-16797818>.

¹¹⁸ “Syria Denies Russian Military Buildup in the Country,” *Haaretz*, September 08, 2015, <https://www.haaretz.com/syria-denies-russian-military-buildup-1.5396750>.

¹¹⁹ Özge Sayginer, “Why Russia Will Never Back Down? Reasons behind Supporting the Assad Regime,” *The European Strategist*, June 20, 2012.

training to its army, particularly teaching Syrians how to use Russian weapons.¹²⁰ The critics replied with a firm stance by underlying that “Syria is our friend, and we fulfil all our obligations to our friends.”¹²¹ The striking firmness of the Russian stance, unlike the U.S. hesitance, showed itself in train-and equip-programs as well. While Western hesitance contributed to radicalization, Russian promptness contributed to Assad’s survival. With the MI-8 and MI-17 helicopters delivered to Syria, the regime conducted several barrel-bomb attacks with severe humanitarian consequences in Homs, which were widely criticized.¹²² The criticized delivery diplomacy continued without interruption, which was confirmed by Assad as well.¹²³

On the other hand, Russia’s delivery diplomacy was well tailored not to disrupt regional balances and anger its allies, particularly Israel. This was probably aimed to limit the U.S. reaction to its delivery diplomacy and constrain the critiques on the mismatch of the nature of delivery with the discourse of counterterrorism. After the E.U. lifted the arms embargo – ban on arms sales – Russia announced it would deliver S-300 AD systems that are effective in intercepting fighters and cruise missiles. However, following the visit of Netanyahu to Moscow in May 2013 to convince Putin not to transfer those systems which would substantially limit Israel’s possible operations into Syrian territories to strike Iranian units, the delivery was postponed. The postponement of the delivery continued until the downing of Russian IL-76 COOT ELINT aircraft by Syrian air defense systems

¹²⁰ “Insight: Russia’s Syria Diplomacy, A Game of Smoke and Mirrors,” *Reuters*, June 6, 2013.

¹²¹ Miriam Elder, “Syria Will Receive Attack Helicopters from Russia, Kremlin Confirms,” *The Guardian*, June 28, 2012. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/jun/28/syria-receive-attack-helicopter-russia?newsfeed=true>

¹²² Michael R Gordon, David E. Sanger, and Eric Schmitt, “U.S. Steps Up Criticism of Russian Role in Syrian War,” *The New York Times*, February 17, 2014.

¹²³ “Syria Gets Russian Arms under Deals Signed since Conflict Began: Assad,” *Reuters*, March 31, 2015.

that were supposed to intercept Israel's aircraft that was concealing itself as a Russian one during an airstrike.

Moscow's initially defensive, covert, and low-profile character of engagement transformed into an assertive - if not offensive - overt, and high profile one, which constituted a tailored response to the U.S. actions. In fact, it is more ambitious than preventing the regime change and broadening the potential gains by employing new means. Beyond freezing the battlefield that would work in favor of Assad, Russia introduced itself as an actor that should be taken into account by the West and regional actors. Russia also made a strategic investment allowing itself a decisive influence on the future of Syria and an invaluable bargaining card that would be used against the regional actors.¹²⁴ The new realities created by Russia were also recognized by Vincent R. Stewart, director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, who stated in February 2016 that the "Russian reinforcement has changed the calculus completely" and added that Assad "is in a much stronger negotiating position than he was just six months ago."¹²⁵ In this way, Moscow ensured that no single power would acquire the advantage of single-handedly driving the dynamics and determining the outcomes of the conflict.

Russia believed the U.S. intervention to degrade ISIL would produce broader outcomes in the region that were considered as detrimental to Moscow. By tipping the balance, Russia tried to reassert its great power status with military engagement.¹²⁶ Dmitry Trenin summarized the new reality as "co-equality."¹²⁷ With the intervention,

¹²⁴ Fawaz A Gerges, "Syria War: Tide Turns Assad's Way amid Ceasefire Push," *BBC News*, February 13, 2016, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-35562943>.

¹²⁵ "U.S. Officials: Russian Airstrikes Have Changed 'Calculus Completely' in Syria," *Washington Post*, February 9, 2016.

¹²⁶ Alina Polyakova, "Russia Is a Great Power Once Again Putin's Syria Intervention Saved Assad. But Is He Ready for What Comes Next?," *The Atlantic*, February 26, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/02/russia-syria-putin-assad-trump-isis-gh-outa/554270/>.

¹²⁷ Dimitri Trenin, "Putin's Syria Gambit Aims at Something Bigger than Syria," *The Tablet*, October 13, 2015, <http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-news-and-politics/194109/putin-syria-trenin>.

Russia found the opportunity to showcase its military prowess with the cruise missile attack from the ships in the Caspian Sea, therefore claiming technological parity and validating its power projection capability through deploying the aircraft carrier Admiral Kuznetsov to the Mediterranean. With the intervention, Russia also transformed its war-fighting capacity by introducing joint and combined arms operations to its military lexicon, which was traditionally a military power organized through single service concepts. In other words, Russia increased its training and adaptability to different operational theaters despite certain humiliating failures such as the crash of a Russian aircraft landing on Admiral Kuznetsov.


Apart from the military gains, two factors played a predominant role in the decision to intervene. Firstly, the relations with the West severely deteriorated after the intervention in Ukraine. The Syrian intervention provided the opportunity to diffuse the isolation, which eventually started to crumble, despite the fact that the sanctions remained in place. Russia, by countering the Western encroachment abroad, tried to distract Western attention away from its “near abroad” based on the expectation that the U.S. will feel constrained and unwilling to interfere in Ukraine overwhelmingly as long as it remains distracted and constrained in the Middle East.¹²⁸ Secondly, Russia effectively perceived the changing nature of the relations on the ground, particularly, souring relations and growing distrust between the U.S. and Turkey. The intervention and eventual setup of hotlines and deconfliction procedures between the coalition and Russia were perceived as an admission that Assad will stay in power and a renunciation of regime change.

¹²⁸ Xander Snyder, “What Russia’s Middle East Strategy Is Really About,” *Business Insider*, October 16, 2017, <https://www.businessinsider.com/russia-middle-east-strategy-explained-2017-10>.



THREE

OUTCOMES – DISTRUST,
STRATEGY CHANGE,
AND INTERVENTION



THE GROWTH OF DISTRUST OF THE UNITED STATES

Turkey's initial perspective on the Syrian conflict was explained in the first chapter in which it was argued that the attempts to encourage Assad to meet the requests of the Syrian people left their place to growing criticism and disenchantment. Beyond the growing resentment towards Assad, the preferences and the way of handling the crisis also triggered the process of questioning the West, and eventually leaving its place to growing distrust. The evolution of distrust can be distinguished into three periods. The first period covers the time span from the onset of the crisis in 2011 to the rise of ISIL and the corresponding strategy change of the U.S., tailored to counter the territorialization of the threat. The second period covers the period spanning from the U.S. strategy change and direct engagement on the ground in September 2014, creating room for the PYD/YPG's territorialization, and Ankara's subsequent strategy change to counter the territorialization of terrorist threats in August 2016. The third period refers to Turkey's military involvement in Syria to curb further territorialization of threats and to the growing divergence between old allies, with the U.S. encouragement of the PYD/YPG to expand to Manbij, and the consequent decision to conduct the Raqqah operation with it. The importance of handling this process through this periodization stems from the interaction of the factors on the ground, and in specific the changing character of war and the corresponding actors' reactions leading to the divergence of their end-states.

BEFORE THE MUTATION: SIGNS OF GROWING DISTRUST

WESTERN INACTION AGAINST ASSAD AND ITS PERCEPTION BY TURKEY

Turkey's and other actors' positions and reactions to the evolving crisis were discussed in Chapter 1, arguing how the inaction caused the mutation of the crisis. Despite the fact that at the initial stage the West made aligned statements, the resistance of Assad eventually led them not to support words with deeds. Turkey, too, initially tried to convince Assad to lead the transition and to address the protesters' call for reforms. Assad's brutal crackdown strategy and Western inaction marked the beginning of distrust between Turkey and the West, even though both sides continued to cooperate on the diplomatic front to find common ground and define a strategy that could curb the violence on the ground. However, as the clashes intensified, President Erdoğan gave the initial signs of Turkey's changing stance towards the regime, even announcing that "Syria is our internal problem."¹²⁹ Prime Minister Davutoğlu, too, with the hope of taking a stance "on the right side of history,"¹³⁰ in 2012 stated, "We hope that a military intervention will never be necessary... However, the Syrian regime has to find a way of making peace with its own people to eliminate this option. If the oppression continues, Turkey is ready for any scenario."¹³¹

However, thanks to firm support from Russia and Iran, the Assad regime refrained from addressing the voices of change of the people and instead opted for crashing the protestors. Davutoğlu's words un-

¹²⁹ "Suriye Bizim İç Meselemiz," *Haber5*, August 7, 2011, <http://haber5.com/guncel/Erdoğan-suriye-bizim-ic-meselemiz>.

¹³⁰ Ahmet Davutoğlu, "Principles of Turkish Foreign Policy and Regional Political Structuring", *TEPAV Turkey Policy Brief Series*, 2012, http://www.mfa.gov.tr/site_media/html/bakanmakale_tepev.pdf, 8.

¹³¹ "Turkey Ready for 'Any Scenario' in Syria," *Al Jazeera*, November 29, 2011, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2011/11/20111129134450458118.html>.

derlined Turkey's determination to intervene in the case of the crisis spillover into Turkey. The decisive position came specifically after the negligence on Turkey's recommendations to lead the reform process, which eventually brought about a considerably more assertive position towards the crisis, driven by the principle of staying on the right side of the history. On the other hand, Turkey's major miscalculation with regards to the Western firmness on the promotion of democracy with an effective assertiveness caused dismay in Ankara. Furthermore, as suggested by Ziya Öniş, the U.S. and the EU pushed Turkey to play a more proactive role, while their push was not reinforced by their activity on the ground. This was a reflection of the Obama doctrine termed "leading from behind"¹³² and "no boots on the grounds."¹³³ In other words, Turkey failed to acknowledge and recognize that the international community and Obama were reluctant to become involved in another intervention.¹³⁴ This was also an outcome of the fact that Ankara, as well as its allies, was far from thoroughly grasping the dynamics on the ground due to insufficient knowledge and intelligence,¹³⁵ which inevitably increased the likelihood of miscalculations.

Initial signs of miscalculation that caused security concerns appeared when the Assad regime withdrew its forces from Kurdish-populated areas to concentrate its forces near the capital and western parts of the country. In fact, as the clashes within Syria started to expand, Turkey claimed to "manage the wave of change in the Middle East"

¹³² Simon Chesterman, "'Leading from Behind': The Responsibility to Protect, the Obama Doctrine, and Humanitarian Intervention after Libya," *Ethics & International Affairs* 25, no.3 (October 2011), 280; Charles Krauthammer, "The Obama Doctrine: Leading from Behind," *The Washington Post*, April 28, 2011, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-obama-doctrine-leading-from-behind/2011/04/28/AFBCy18E_story.html?utm_term=.5b9426286171.

¹³³ Colin Dueck, *Obama Doctrine: American Grand Strategy Today*, (Oxford University Press, Oxford 2015), 1.

¹³⁴ Ziya Öniş, "Turkey and the Arab Revolutions: Boundaries of Regional Power Influence in a Turbulent Middle East," *Mediterranean Politics* 19, no.2, (2014): 211.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 212.

and declared to be the “speaker and the leader of the peace process.”¹³⁶ In other words, Turkey adopted an “initiative for change” approach upon the failure of the “process of persuasion.”¹³⁷ However, as in the case of the Western approach, Turkey also hesitated to act promptly and unilaterally, with the hope that the international community’s support of democracy would lead to the initiation of more substantial steps against Assad. However, Assad managed to transnationalize the uprising and export its problems beyond Syria’s borders. He was aware that Turkey’s soft underbelly was the Kurds in Turkey, and the resolution process was already fragile, constraining Turkey from taking prompt action. Turkey’s Western allies, unlike those of Assad, displayed only rhetorical support and showed loose solidarity. Furthermore, the withdrawal of Syrian forces from Kurdish-populated areas raised concerns about the creation of a Syrian “Kurdistan” under the control of PKK-affiliated PYD/YPG instead of representing the will of the local population, and triggered the stereotypes of the Iraq example.¹³⁸ With the exception of supporting statements that acknowledged Turkey’s concerns, Ankara could not get substantial support from its allies, neither from NATO, the UN, nor from individual states. Following the inaction by the West and the U.S., Turkey criticized their positions by stating that “inaction is not an option” and began to feel alone while facing the growing crisis. The inability of the UN to act and initiate a formidable action to resolve the crisis, thanks to Russia’s use of its veto power, not only disappointed Turkey as the refugees began to flow into Turkey, but also complicated the situation at home and spoiled the relations with the EU. In fact, the growing refugee inflow and the territorialization of the PYD/YPG fueled distrust towards the West. From Turkey’s perspective, the EU seemed

¹³⁶ “Davutoğlu’ndan Net Mesaj,” *Milliyet*, April 26, 2012, <http://siyaset.milliyet.com.tr/davutoglu-ndan-net-mesaj/siyaset/siyasetdetay>.

¹³⁷ Barış Çağlar, “Türkiye’nin Suriye Politikası: Yeni-Klasik Realist Bir Bakış,” *Ortadoğu Analiz* 4, no.47 (November 2012): 47.

¹³⁸ “Bayraklar PYD’ den Maaşlar Esad’dan,” *Milliyet*, August 14, 2012.

merely to expect Ankara to take measures to stop the refugee flows into Europe while asking Turkey to support or stay defiant toward the moves of the PYD/YPG in Northern Syria, both of which were signs of a negligence toward Turkey's concerns.

REACTIONS TO THE RF-4 A/C DOWNING

In Chapter 1 it was discussed how Syria preferred to transnationalize the uprising by exporting its internal problems to neighboring Turkey since Turkey began to be perceived as the most ardent supporter of the uprising with the rhetoric of democracy. One of the most significant developments of the crisis came when the Turkish RF-4 reconnaissance aircraft was downed on June 12, 2012 in the Eastern Mediterranean international waters. As Turkey started to push for change in Syria, abandoning the process of persuasion and adopting the initiative for change, critical developments began to take place.¹³⁹ Putting aside the other factors behind this provocative decision, the downing of a Turkish aircraft represented how the Syrian regime was emboldened with the inaction of the West. Probably, the most striking feature of this decision was its potential implications on Syria if Turkey would have responded with the use of force. However, Turkey found itself in an awkward position. On the one hand, Turkey was unable to find the expected support from the West and particularly from the U.S. as inaction was the strategy at the time. And, on the other hand, unlike Turkey's allies, Assad's allies stood firm on keeping him in power and curbing the pace of developments that were degrading his position. In other words, the level of commitment to alliance relations determined the level of action. It can also be suggested that a decision that could change the balance of power could not have been made solely in Damascus since the decision was goal oriented.¹⁴⁰ For Moscow, if they had gotten involved, it would have been a test of how far the West was

¹³⁹ Çağlar, "Türkiye'nin Suriye Politikası, 45-46.

¹⁴⁰ Orhan, Suriye ile Jet Krizi, 9.

determined to bring about regime change and to stand by a NATO member, namely Turkey.

In Turkish media, relying on the French *Le Figaro*, it was reported that Russia had installed a radar 10 km from the Turkish borders in al-Qasab, Latakia, to track the movements in the Incirlik Air Base and Kurecik Radar Base. Ras al-Basit, where the Turkish aircraft was downed, was distanced 20 km south of al-Qasab.¹⁴¹ The Russian delivery diplomacy showed its outright result in this incidence. Interestingly, Russians had made a warning on June 15, 2012 through the Head of Rosoboronexport, Anatoly Isaykin, who stated, “I would like to say these mechanisms are really a good means of defense, a reliable defense against attacks from the air or sea ... This is not a threat, but whoever is planning an attack should think about this.”¹⁴² With the delivery diplomacy, Russia not only provided defense systems but also helped remove prudence in the decision calculus of Damascus. Otherwise, probably, prudence would have outrun promptness. When the event took place, the Russian media acknowledged and confirmed that the Pantsir S1 (SA-22) that had been deployed last downed the aircraft, which helped to build the Russian role in the game and calculus.

In terms of the event’s implications, the most significant was the delineation of lines between Syria and Turkey in a bolder way. Following the incident, President Erdoğan declared that the Syrian regime poses an open and ultimate threat to Turkey’s security and made assurances that the move would not be left unreciprocated.¹⁴³ Accompanying steps supported the strong rhetoric. Diplomatically, Turkey called

¹⁴¹ “Suriye Düşürdü İddiası,” *Hürriyet*, June 22, 2012, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/plan-et/20823736.asp>.

¹⁴² Andrew E. Kramer, “Russia Sending Missile Systems to Shield Syria,” *The New York Times*, June 15, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/16/world/europe/russia-sending-air-and-sea-defenses-to-syria.html>.

¹⁴³ “Dostluğumuz Değerli; Gazabımız Şiddetlidir,” *Milliyet*, June 27, 2012, <https://www.milliyet.com.tr/siyaset/dostlugumuz-degerli-gazabimiz-siddetlidir-1559397>.

NATO to convene under Article 4 of the agreement for consultations, and if possible, to prompt a collective action. In an effort to elicit a stronger response to the regime, Davutoğlu stated, “By downing the Turkish plane, Syria attacked the international society, international law, countries in the region, international legitimacy, and NATO.”¹⁴⁴ However, NATO’s backing was perceived as a weak voice, not going beyond supporting statements, which at the same time, erroneously encouraged Turkey to adopt a fiercer stance. NATO’s weak stance in backing Turkey added to the already growing disappointment, while the growing tensions led Turkey to seek ways to increase the pressures on the regime. The initial steps were the change of the engagement rules to prevent the re-occurrence of similar events, announcements of support to the opposition, the military buildup along the Syrian border, and the declaration of the regime as an enemy.¹⁴⁵ With the new rules of engagement, particularly the Syrian military assets operating in the vicinity of the border were declared to be treated as enemy assets. This hampered the regime’s operations along the border after the incident.

The incident showed how Turkey was being left alone in the Syrian crisis particularly in the time when hard power assets were being introduced. Despite the West diplomatically supporting Turkey and condemning the incident, words without deeds were far below expectations. By changing the engagement rules and declaring its determination for retaliation, Turkey, in fact, created an undeclared safe zone that inadvertently worked in favor of the PYD/YPG regime. This shows how the uncertainty on the ground and the ambiguity of the actors had distorted the picture on the ground and paved the way for miscalculations and unintended consequences. In other words, Turkey

¹⁴⁴ “Çelik: Bu Olaydan Sonra Başka Bir Aşamaya Geçilmiştir,” *Milliyet*, June 24, 2012, <https://www.milliyet.com.tr/siyaset/celik-bu-olaydan-sonra-baska-bir-asamaya-gecilmistir-1557989>.

¹⁴⁵ “Erdoğan: TSK’nın Angajman Kuralları Değişmiştir,” *Euronews*, June 26, 2012, <http://tr.euronews.com/2012/06/26/Erdoğan-tsknin-angajman-kurallari-degismistir/>.

unintentionally created a strip that allowed the PYD/YPG to flourish and strengthen its hold.

Syria, on the other hand, enjoyed how its alliance was solid against Turkey. It was an extremely important event for Syria to send a message both domestically and internationally. The downing of a Turkish aircraft meant domestically strengthening the solidarity of the regime supporters while peeling off Turkey's supporters, and internationally was a move to showcase that its air defense systems were robust enough to intercept aircraft and deter the possibility of military intervention through airpower. In short, the growing disparity between the level of supports ensured that Assad stayed solid and added new factors to Western inaction. The ultimate outcome of this incident for Ankara was the growing distrust of its old allies.

NO-FLY ZONE AND SAFE-ZONE DEBATES

When the regime artillery fire caused the death of five civilians at the border town of Akçakale in October 2012, Turkey became more vocal and once more called on the international community and NATO to react and take a more assertive posture. Turkey increased the tone of its rhetoric while accusing Assad of being "bloodthirsty," and warned the regime that Turkey was getting closer to declaring war.¹⁴⁶ The chief of general staff confirmed the retaliation and warned, "If this continues, we will respond in a much harsher way"¹⁴⁷ and underlined that Turkey's rational response should not be perceived as a sign of weakness,¹⁴⁸ a rhetoric that was tailored to discourage any further attempts to carry over the crisis into Turkey. Apart from retaliating and warning, Turkey did not initiate any military intervention mostly in order to avoid

¹⁴⁶ "Meraklısı Değiliz ama Savaştan Uzak Değiliz," *Milliyet*, October 6, 2012, <https://www.milliyet.com.tr/siyaset/meraklisi-degiliz-ama-savastan-uzak-degiliz-1607393>.

¹⁴⁷ "Biz Buradayız Dimdik Ayaktayız," *Milliyet*, October 10, 2012, <https://www.milliyet.com.tr/gundem/biz-buradayiz-dimdik-ayaktayiz-1609556>.

¹⁴⁸ "Dostluğumuz Değerli; Gazabımız Şiddetlidir," *Milliyet*, June 27, 2012, <https://www.milliyet.com.tr/siyaset/dostlugumuz-degerli-gazabimiz-siddetlidir-1559397>.

unilateral action. Being aware that Russia was the leading supporter of the regime, to curb its support to the regime and eventually to balance the delivery diplomacy, on October 30, 2012, Turkey forced a Russian airliner to land at Ankara Esenboğa Airport under the suspicion it was transporting military equipment. However, those attempts were far behind in achieving the objective of balancing Russian activities in Syria despite Turkey retaining the advantage of geographical proximity. As the regime became more brutal and the refugees started to flow to the borders, Turkey recommended establishing a security and no-fly zone along the strip of the Turkish border, which would have allowed providing humanitarian assistance to the refugees in the Syrian territories and would have ensured continued support to the opposition. The growing flow of refugees and Assad's attempts to transnationalize the crisis were the alarms that pushed Turkey to increase its efforts in convincing the international community through the UN and NATO to establish a no-fly zone in Northern Syria. Turkey itself placed a number of sanctions covering the freeze of Syrian government assets and the cancelation of military sales.¹⁴⁹ Turkey assumed that the no-fly zone would prevent both the spillover of the conflict and refugee flows into the country while it would also halt the regime's bombing of the opposition, providing an opportunity to the opposition to organize itself.

However, the U.S. and the West hesitated to enact and support the no-fly zone and any safe zone. The U.S. Chief of General Staff General Dempsey announced that the no-fly-zone would not be possible since neither NATO nor the U.S. can sustain this option. While the U.S. ambassador in Ankara announced this option would not be possible without a UN mandate, the U.S. would not support it militarily, and would not support any military solution.¹⁵⁰ Turkey was disappointed

¹⁴⁹ Joshua W. Walker, "Turkey's Time in Syria: Future Scenarios," *Middle East Brief* 63 (2012): 1–7.

¹⁵⁰ "Ambassador Ricciardone Press Roundtable – Ankara News TV Bureau Chiefs," *Embassy of the United States Ankara-Turkey*, October 12, 2012, http://turkey.usembassy.gov/amb_ricciardone_101612.html.

by the rejection of this option. Following a question by the media, Erdoğan confirmed his intention to support the option militarily. Despite not finding the support it sought, with the exception of weak voices, Ankara partially enacted a no-fly zone by changing the rules of engagement, by declaring the downing of air assets flying near the border and criticizing the international community for merely watching what is happening and not reacting.¹⁵¹

The debates on the train-and-equip program for the moderate opposition continued in 2012. However due to the fear that the deliveries might end up in the wrong hands, the U.S. did not provide substantial support to the opposition, neglecting the reports from different agencies about the necessity to support the Free Syrian Army - Obama did not permit any agency to assist the group.¹⁵² Both the growing refugee flows, the worsening humanitarian situation upon Assad's crackdown strategy, and the growing hesitance continued to fuel Ankara's distrust towards the United States.

OPERATION ACTIVE FENCE AND THE NATO PATRIOTS

The downing of the aircraft in June 2012 and the artillery fire causing deaths in October 2012 removed the ambiguity about Assad's intent to transnationalize the conflict to ease the pressure within the country. The immediate outcome was realistically to render Turkey's air defense capability against any potential future attempts by the regime, particularly the possibility of a ballistic missile attack. The worst-case scenario, depending on the past records of the Syrian regime, was the use of chemical and biological weapons, a possibility which already increased anxiety in Ankara. In November 2012, the first reports started to come from Syria about the regime's use of chemical weapons towards the

¹⁵¹ "Erdoğan'ın Hedefinde Hem Esad Hem de CHP Vardı," *Milliyet*, March 6, 2012, <https://www.milliyet.com.tr/siyaset/erdoganin-hedefinde-hem-esad-hem-de-chp-vardi-1511865>.

¹⁵² "Syria Crisis: US Concerned Weapons Reaching Jihadis," *The Guardian*, October 16, 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/middle-east-live/2012/oct/16/syria-crisis-us-weapons-jihadis-live>.

opposition. The use of chemical weapons apart from creating severe deadly consequences for the Syrian people, inevitably elevated Turkey's concerns. A possible use of chemical weapons with ballistic missiles was perceived as an imminent threat since Assad already proved his intent to transnationalize the crisis. An effective air defense system and capability that could intercept such potential attacks and its possible impacts on the population urged Turkey to seek options to ensure its air defense, which would mean the deployment of NATO assets to cover this gap. For Turkey, NATO's support, apart from increasing its air defense capacity, would mean a show of NATO's solidarity with Turkey not only against Assad but also toward the regime's ardent supporters, namely Russia and Iran. Upon Turkey's request, NATO initiated the Operation Active Fence, which foresaw the deployment of NATO air defense assets close to the Syrian border to deter both the possible use of such weapons and to curb any emboldening to use them since the decision would not be taken solely in Damascus. In other words, beyond its actual military function, Turkey valued the operation more in a political sense since it was sending a significant message.

Operation Active Fence was initiated with the deployment of Patriot systems belonging to the Netherlands, Germany, and the U.S. in January 2013. However, upon the UN-brokered resolution, led by Moscow, the countries started to question their deployment with an excuse of a reduced likelihood of a chemical attack. Even the U.S. withdrew its system in October 2015, pledging to deploy them within one week whenever needed, after reiterating its commitment to Turkey's security and regional stability.¹⁵³ The Netherlands and Germany followed a similar track, leaving only Italy and Spain who followed up on their commitment to deploy SAMP-T systems. Despite NATO's

¹⁵³ "U.S., Germany to Pull Patriot Missiles from Turkey," *Reuters*, August 16, 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-germany-turkey-patriots-idUSKCN0QL0DL20150816>; Burak Ege Bekdil, "US Begins Removing Patriot Missiles from Turkey," *Defense News*, October 11, 2015, <https://www.defensenews.com/home/2015/10/11/us-begins-removing-patriot-missiles-from-turkey/>

commitment and support to continue with the renewed deployments, the reduced support from Washington degraded the level of firmness of support and eventually increased Ankara's concerns.

Given the political significance of the support and the value attached to it, what was disappointing for Ankara was that the decision was taken less than a month after Turkey had opened its bases to the U.S. and the coalition in support of the operation initiated against DAESH. Ankara perceived this as proof of growing differences vis-à-vis the territorialization of threats in Syria, and the subsequent diverging end-states. The withdrawal of Patriots, except reflecting that the NATO commitment did not go as far as a formidable presence on the ground, delivered a message to Russia that the U.S. is not wholeheartedly in support of Turkey. The immediate outcome of this withdrawal was observed as an increase in Russian assertiveness in Syria, which ended up with direct military engagement in September 2015. In other words, while hesitance to act promptly in Syria encouraged Moscow, the growing distrust and diverging relations between Ankara and Washington removed doubts and hesitance in Moscow.

AFTER THE MUTATION: ROAD TO OVERT DIVERGENCE

ELIMINATING THE THREATS: COMPREHENSIVE VS. SELECTIVE STRATEGY

The Syrian uprising mutated its character into a war with the territorialization of both DAESH and the PYD/YPG terrorist threats introducing a wave of questioning. As discussed in Chapter 1 the radicalization brought about the territorialization of DAESH and the territorialization of the PYD/YPG initially through the regime's intentional withdrawal to transnationalize the conflict accompanied by the power vacuum created by the crumbling regime which exposed the already growing grievances between Turkey and the U.S. In that time, Ankara's other Western allies gradually started to focus more on

the refugee flows that were caused by both the territorializing threats and the regime's crackdown strategy. DAESH cannot be seen as the sole factor of the refugee outflow. Both the PYD/YPG's attempts to change the demography of the territories it captured and the regime's brutality contributed to this outcome. Refugees shuffled the priorities of the EU, which became more focused on the refugee inflow due to the potential repercussions such as the eventual export of radicalization into Europe. The outcome of that process was the adoption of a more defensive and low-profile stance towards the war in Syria.

Particularly the rise of DAESH and its sweeping expansion with incomparable brutality changed the calculus of the U.S. and triggered a strategy change with eventual military intervention, as discussed in the previous chapter. The second period of questioning corresponds to the mutation of the conflict. The rift between Ankara and Washington became visible when Ayn al-Arab fell under the control of DAESH on September 13, 2014, and with the United States' following decision to deliver weapons to the PYD/YPG fighters and provide air support to its militants to fight against another territorialized terrorist organization.¹⁵⁴ President Erdoğan condemned the decision by the U.S. and the coalition with the words that "the PYD is equal with the PKK for us. It [PYD] is also a terrorist organization. It would be very wrong for America to expect us to say 'yes' after openly announcing such support for a terrorist organization. It cannot expect such a thing from us, and we cannot say 'yes' to such a thing either."¹⁵⁵ From Ankara's perspective, the U.S. act was equal to supporting one terrorist organization to defeat another. In its very

¹⁵⁴ Neff Thomas Gibbons, "Pentagon Airdrops Ammunition to Groups Fighting the Islamic State," *The Washington Post*, October 12, 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/check-point/wp/2015/10/12/pentagon-airdrops-ammunition-to-groups-fighting-the-islamic-state/>.

¹⁵⁵ "President Erdoğan Says PYD 'No Different than PKK' for Turkey," *Hurriyet Daily News*, October 19, 2014, <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/president-erdogan-says-pyd-no-different-than-pkk-for-turkey-73172>.

basic terms, the naming of terrorist organizations and the strategy to eliminate them created the crux of the problem, and revealed their diverging outlooks regarding the developments in Syria.

Fundamentally, both Ankara and Washington were concerned about the territorialization of threats. However, while Ankara perceived the rise of the PYD/YPG as a threat, Washington preferred to see it as an asset which can be utilized to fight DAESH. This incommensurable understanding inevitably and gradually contributed to the growing distrust between the two allies. For Ankara, the uprising, the inaction, and consequent radicalization augmented the territorialization of the threats, and the most effective strategy had to comprehensively involve different aspects of the problem. Therefore, a comprehensive strategy tailored to tackle the root dynamics that created the problems had to be based on the objective that would include the removal of the regime and cover the social economic and political domains of unrest. However, Washington identified a strategy that prioritized DAESH and preferred to engage with it selectively. Consequentially, the differences in strategic outlooks in addressing the threats further deepened the grievances.

Beyond the disagreements on the strategy to tackle the terrorist threats emanating from Syria, and the differences in priorities, the pressures on Turkey to allow the passage of fighters through Turkish soil also frustrated Ankara. In the meantime, Turkey was facing unexpected pressures and groundless accusations in the media of supporting DAESH. The reports based their claims on the misrepresentation of the trucks that were carrying weapons to the Turkmen in Syria in their fight both against the regime and the radical groups in the south of the Hatay province of Turkey. Moreover, a court decision in Turkey openly uncovered that the disclosure of the news about the trucks was intentionally orchestrated by the Gulenists, the perpetrators of the July 15 coup attempt, and whose leader is still a resident in the U.S. despite Ankara's numerous calls for his extradition.

The international community and the United States ignored the fact that 49 officials were kidnapped from Turkey's Mosul Consulate during the DAESH assault on Mosul. The kidnapped Turkish government officials severely tied Ankara's hands, preventing them from acting more assertively and decisively while the U.S. compelled Turkey to do so. Furthermore, from Ankara's perspective, Washington had not supported it in its attempts to free the kidnapped personnel and had not affirmed and cooperated with any Turkish cross-border operation against DAESH.¹⁵⁶ Ankara considered this lack of support and constraining stance as an attempt to push Turkey to negotiate with the PYD/YPG/PKK.

However, on the other hand, Washington, this time, complained about the inaction of Ankara during ISIL/DAESH's Ayn al Arab (Kobani) assault, while it tried to curb DAESH with modest airstrikes.¹⁵⁷ The initial approach was criticized for being modest and containment-oriented rather than focusing on entirely destroying it.¹⁵⁸ Moreover, Ankara faced criticism of not sending ground troops and supplying arms to the PYD/YPG terrorists. It was even severely criticized for not allowing the PKK fighters to enter Syria through Turkey. PM Davutoğlu openly proposed a comprehensive strategy that addressed military, political, humanitarian, and economic aspects of the problem and agreed to send troops if an anti-ISIL strategy covers the Assad regime.¹⁵⁹ On October 13, 2014, he suggested the enactment of a no-

¹⁵⁶ Cahit Armağan Dilek, "2016 Sonu İtibariyle Türkiye'nin İflas Eden Ortadoğu Politikası," in *Türk Dış Politikasını Nasıl Bilirdiniz*, ed. by Umit Ozdag and Yelda Demirag (Ankara, Kripto, 2017), 64.

¹⁵⁷ Arshad, Mohammed, "U.S. Frustrated by Turkish Inaction, But Seeks Support over Time," *Reuters*, October 8, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-usa-turkey-idUSKCN0HX2I020141008>.

¹⁵⁸ Spencer Ackerman, "Khorasan Group Back in US Crosshairs as Air Strikes Hit Non-ISIL Targets in Syria," *The Guardian*, November 6, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2014/nov/06/us-syria-khorasan-group-us-military-isis-air-strikes>.

¹⁵⁹ "Esad'ı Kapsarsa Kara Gücü Olur," *Hürriyet*, October 7, 2014. See also Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine," *The Atlantic*, April 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/>.

fly-zone and buffer zone¹⁶⁰ to organize the operations outside of the Turkish borders and to address humanitarian needs, since Turkey already faced a refugee influx of 180,000 individuals from Ayn al-Arab, including the Kurdish population of the town which was the largest since the beginning of the crisis in 2011. Davutoğlu's insistence on a comprehensive strategy was the result of the inaction and hesitance that was observed in Turkey's allies while Turkey refused to bear all the burden of an anti-DAESH strategy that was offering a partial fix to a broader problem. Davutoğlu stressed Turkey's position and the growing threats in Syria by stating that "we don't want to see the regime, ISIL, and PKK on our border."¹⁶¹ In other words, Turkey, which had faced the U.S. inaction at the beginning of the conflict, this time, in order not to face and bear all the burden acted with hesitance and conditioned its involvement and support upon the articulation of a comprehensive strategy.

One of the depressing and disappointing moments came with the disagreement over the strategic outlook on the nature of threats and the accusations that Turkey was supporting DAESH as a leverage to extract concessions for the PKK. From Ankara's perspective, not allowing PKK fighters to transit on its soil to fight against DAESH and the attempts to limit the territorialization of the PYD/YPG were legitimate security concerns. What is more, adopting a decisive and assertive approach against DAESH would have meant attracting another threat on itself since the West was quite unwilling to address the security challenges and threats emanating from the country.

The growing pressures from the U.S. and the international community, and the media campaign accusing Turkey of siding with DAESH, led Ankara to consent to the passages of the Kurdish fight-

¹⁶⁰ "Turkey Won't Embark on an Adventure in Syria," *Hurriyet Daily News*, October 14, 2014.

¹⁶¹ Lyse Doucet, "Davutoğlu: Sınırımızda IŞİD'i, PKK'yı, Esad'ı İstemiyoruz," *BBC Türkçe*, October 28, 2014, https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler/2014/10/141027_davutoглу_doucet.

ers who were part of the Peshmerga of the Kurdish Regional Government of Iraq.¹⁶² However, pressures to permit the passage were perceived as a sign of the neglect of Turkish security interests and different priorities in Syria. Another supporting concession came when the Incirlik Base was opened to the use of coalition flights for the anti-DAESH campaign named Operation Inherent Resolve. In the end, Turkey joined the coalition in July 2015, despite the diverging priorities and end-states. Turkey's decision was criticized by analysts claiming that Turkey was dragged into projects of which it was not aware under the banner of the fight against DAESH.¹⁶³ Even though Turkey declared its participation in the coalition, during the operations, Turkish Air Forces' assets rarely received air tasking orders from the coalition's Air Operation Centre, probably to prevent any possibility of targeting PYD/YPG terrorists that were conducting attacks on Turkish soil. By opening the Incirlik base to the coalition, Turkey again made a significant operational contribution.¹⁶⁴ More importantly, Turkey's participation meant the delegitimation of DAESH ideology, since Turkey, as a Muslim-populated country, constituted the antithesis of the messages that ISIL conveyed. In that sense, Turkey made its unique contribution by delegitimizing DAESH ideology beyond increasing the operational effectiveness of the coalition by permitting the use of Incirlik, thus reducing the overall burden on the U.S. budget. In short, despite its concerns being neglected, Ankara continued to support the efforts in the fight against DAESH.

¹⁶² Katrin Elger, Hasnain Kazim, Christoph Reuter, and Holger Stark, "The Caliphate Next Door: Turkey Faces up to Its Islamic State Problem," *Der Spiegel*, September September 2014, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/islamic-state-jihadist-activity-in-northern-syria-forces-turkey-hand-a-994392.html>; "Turkey Confirms It Helps KRG Peshmerga Reinforcements Reach Besieged Kobane," *Rudaw*, October 20, 2014, <http://rudaw.net/english/middleeast/20102014>; "Turkey to Let Iraqi Kurds Join Kobane Battle," *Al Jazeera*, October 21, 2014, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/10/turkey-allow-kurds-join-fight-against-isil-2014102093610603527.html>.

¹⁶³ Dilek, "2016 Sonu İtibariyle Türkiye'nin İflas Eden Ortadoğu Politikası," 68-69.

¹⁶⁴ Jen Psaki, "Daily Press Briefing," *U.S. Department of State*, October 9, 2014, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/dpb/2014/10/232808.htm>.

IGNORANCE OF TURKEY'S SECURITY CONCERNS

Turkey faced the territorialization of two imminent threats along its borders with the rise of the PYD/YPG and DAESH as the control of the regime – deterritorialization – started to disappear. Turkey, from the very beginning, was aware of the fact that any power vacuum would create a space conducive for non-state actors. Moving from this assumption, Turkey tried to persuade its Western allies to act and resolve the problem either through the persuasion of the regime or by calling the international community to act more decisively for a regime change. However, the inaction caused the radicalization of the groups and brought about their eventual territorialization which created equally challenging security threats for Turkey.

As the uprising expanded and as the regime began to withdraw its forces, the PYD/YPG was the first non-state actor that capitalized from this power vacuum. Assad's attempts to transnationalize the crisis opened room for the PYD/YPG. In fact, Assad relied on two dynamics that could create hesitance and inaction on the West: firstly by releasing the extremists, he fueled radicalization, and secondly by creating room for the PYD, which had opted for the transnationalization of the threat, he curtailed any future decisive acts by Turkey. Both dynamics, emboldened with the inaction, ended up in territorialization. Upon the withdrawal of the regime forces, the PYD began to declare the creation of cantons in Afrin, Kobani, and Jazira in January 2012. Apart from Turkey, this also tensed the relations of the PYD with the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq, which culminated in trench-building by the KDP-led KRG between northern Syria and northern Iraq with the purpose of preventing the transit of terrorists through the border. This was considered as a move against the PYD's territorial control, particularly in Sinjar, a strategic location that would connect Iraq and Syria. With the loss of KRG control over Sinjar, the PKK established not only an alternative base to Qandil but also a transit route between Iraq and Syria, which meant an expansion of the

PKK threat into Syria. The territorialization and the cantonization in northern Syria were attempts to create an autonomous region within Syria, based on Öcalan's third way strategy. In their calculus, it was a move to strengthen the PKK's hands given the resolution process in Turkey was still alive.

In March 2013, the PKK declared a ceasefire to facilitate the transfer of its militants into Syria, and eventually, and somehow naively, Turkey initiated a resolution process to end PKK terrorism and to put an end to the PKK suppression and manipulation of the Kurdish population. However, the HDP, a party which entered the Turkish parliament with the claim of representing the Kurdish citizens of Turkey, failed to distance itself from PKK's tutelage. In April 2013, one of the HDP's MPs, Aysel Tuğluk, characterized the PKK's actions, its role, and vision with the words, "An armed actor in Syria for a while, an armed actor in Iran in the near future, and organizational and political actor in Europe."¹⁶⁵ The assault in Ayn al-Arab by DAESH in July 2014, initiated a new phase in *actorization* of the PYD/YPG, and the eventual failure of the peace process in Turkey. The Turkish refusal to allow the passage of PKK militants on Turkish soil led the HDP leader to call the Kurdish population in Turkey to rise up against the authority and initiate the process of implementing a process similar to the one in Syria. In other words, the HDP which was expected to distance itself from PKK tutelage called for an uprising with the hope of replicating the 'Rojava' model in Turkey. In July 2015, in Suruç, Figen Yüksekdağ, co-head of the HDP, declared "we rely upon the YPJ, the YPG, and the PYD," affirming the close link between the HDP, PKK, and PYD/YPG. Despite Turkey undertaking the process to eliminate the repressive influence on the Kurdish population of the PKK terrorist organi-

¹⁶⁵ "Aysel Tuğluk PKK'nın Geleceğini Açıkladı!," *Haber3*, April 11, 2013, <https://www.haber3.com/guncel/politika/ayssel-tugluk-pkknin-gelecegini-acikladi-haberi-1850808>.

zation, its counterparts used the process to strengthen the hands of the PYD/YPG in Syria.

In response to the growing security concerns, there were statements by the leaders that clarified the intent of the terrorist group. There were statements by the leaders that clarified the intent of the terrorist group behind the growing security concerns. The words of Abdullah Öcalan about the territorialization of the PYD/YPG stoked that fear, if not increased awareness. For Öcalan, there are two essential fault lines in the region. The first was the foundation of Israel and the second the rise of Kurdish nationalism. For Öcalan, “The dominant Kurdish cooperative faction will gain statehood with the support of the U.S., UK, and Europe. This nationalist segment will be pushed to fight with Arabs, Iranians, and Turks.”¹⁶⁶

In fact, as Ankara adopted an open stance against the regime, the number of PKK attacks dramatically increased in Turkey, causing the loss of more than 90 military and security officials.¹⁶⁷ At that time, Riccardionne, the U.S. ambassador in Ankara, claimed that the regime was delivering weapons to the PKK,¹⁶⁸ a fact that was confirmed by Turkish intelligence agencies.¹⁶⁹ The declaration of Rojava and the cantonization process, and the expanding PYD/YPG foothold in Syria provided a launching pad for the Kurdistan Freedom Hawks (TAK), a hardliner branch of the PYD/YPG/PKK militancy, to conduct attacks in Turkey.¹⁷⁰ The PKK tasked the TAK to expand the conflict into Turkey to mitigate the pressures of Turkey in Syria and to deter further intensification of cross-border counter-terrorism operations. The TAK also claimed responsibility for the attacks con-

¹⁶⁶ Cengiz Kapmaz, *Öcalan'ın İmralı Günleri* (İstanbul: İthaki Yayınları, 2011), 305-6.

¹⁶⁷ “Genelkurmay: 5 Ayda 373 Terörist Öldürüldü, 88 Şehit Verildi,” *Milliyet*, September 10, 2012.

¹⁶⁸ Okan Müderrisoğlu, “Esed PKK'ya Silah Veriyor,” *USA Sabah*, August 15, 2012.

¹⁶⁹ “8 Askeri Şehit Eden Silahlar Suriye'den,” *Star*, August 6, 2012.

¹⁷⁰ “Ankara Bombing: Turkey Strikes Against Kurdish Rebel PKK,” *BBC News*, March 14, 2016, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-35799998>.

ducted on February 17, 2016 and March 13, 2016 in Ankara, and on April 27, 2016 in Bursa.

One of the most direct implications both of the territorialization and the transnationalization of the PYD/YPG threat was felt with the attempts to replicate the ‘Rojava’ model in Turkey in 2015. The military success in Ayn al-Arab, with the extensive airpower support of the coalition, encouraged the PKK and its sympathizers to initiate a similar urban guerrilla and trench warfare in the Kurdish-majority cities in Turkey.¹⁷¹ The PKK, inspired by the Ayn al-Arab (Kobane) experience and replicating DAESH tactics, conflated the distinct sociological contexts of Turkey and Syria by presuming that the majority of the population would support this uprising and join their ranks. On the contrary, the vast majority of the civilian population residing in Turkey emptied the entrenched quarters before the imposition of curfews, thus facilitating the operations of the government forces.¹⁷²

The contextual, structural, and social differences between entrenched ‘Rojava’ and uncontested southeastern Turkey suggest that the PKK’s autonomy model developed in Syria cannot simply be exported into a state.¹⁷³ Nevertheless, while the PKK tried to replicate the ‘Rojava’ model in Turkey, Turkey’s allies were still silent. Even though the expectations and presumption that the prolongation of resistance would eventually pull Turkey to the negotiating table and extract concessions were answered by effective measures and societal support, they nevertheless caused a loss of time in terms of taking decisive military actions in northern Syria.

¹⁷¹ Michiel Leezenberg, “The Ambiguities of Democratic Autonomy: The Kurdish Movement in Turkey and Rojava,” *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 16, no.4 (2016): 683.

¹⁷² Mahmut Bozarslan, “Why PKK Shifted to Urban Warfare,” *Al-Monitor*, March 29, 2016, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/03/turkey-why-pkk-carry-clashes-cities.html>.

¹⁷³ Leezenberg, “The Ambiguities of Democratic Autonomy”, 685.

Being aware that the territorialization of the PYD/YPG could pose a direct security threat to Turkey, Turkey warned several times before the attacks that this territorialization “could lead to the creation of a structure that threatens our borders. Everyone needs to take into account our sensitivities on this issue.”¹⁷⁴ Turkey declared that the territorialization of one terrorist organization (PYD/YPG) at the expense of the deterritorialization of another (DAESH) would necessitate a Turkish intervention as the “most natural right.”¹⁷⁵ Davutoğlu added that Turkey might use military measures if Syria were divided and the PYD got stronger.¹⁷⁶

Turkey, on the other hand, could not intervene militarily in the case of the territorialization of the PYD/YPG due to the prioritization of a diplomatic solution over military ones, to prevent the revival of a ‘Turkey is supporting DAESH’ propaganda attack, and in order not to worsen relations with Washington. However, the same attitude was not present in Washington, specifically with the preference to counter DAESH with the PYD/YPG/PKK.¹⁷⁷ Inevitably, this preference and the arming of the PYD/YPG to the extent of making it a sort of U.S. ally¹⁷⁸ caused the breakdown of the relations between the U.S. and Turkey, its NATO ally.¹⁷⁹ Specifically, arming the PYD/YPG showed

¹⁷⁴ “Thousands Flee as Kurds Near IS-held Syria Town,” *GulfTimes*, June 15, 2015, <https://www.gulf-times.com/story/443305/Thousands-flee-as-Kurds-near-IS-held-Syria-town>

¹⁷⁵ “Müdahale Hakkımız,” *Milliyet*, July 26, 2012, <https://www.milliyet.com.tr/siyaset/mudahale-hakkimiz-1572000>.

¹⁷⁶ Fikret Bila, “Kuzey Irak-Kuzey Suriye Çelişkisi,” *Milliyet*, August 26, 2012, <https://www.milliyet.com.tr/yazarlar/fikret-bila/kuzey-irak-kuzey-suriye-celiskisi-1586338>.

¹⁷⁷ Lynn E. Davis, Jeffrey Martini, Kim Cragin, “A Strategy to Counter ISIL as a Trans-regional Threat,” *Rand Perspective*, (2017): 2.

¹⁷⁸ David Ignatius, “The United States’ Surprise Allies in Syria,” *The Washington Post*, October 15, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-us-hastily-reevaluates-its-syria-strategy/2015/10/15/92d62c54-735c-11e5-9cbb-790369643cf9_story.html?utm_term=.3c24c14f2881.

¹⁷⁹ Mark N. Katz, “U.S. Policy toward Syria: Making the Best of a Bad Situation?,” *Wilson Center Viewpoints*, No: 41, October 2013, 3; 1-5, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/us_policy_toward_syria_making_best_of_bad_situation.pdf; “US Army Report Confirms Direct PKK, YPG Links in Syria,” *Daily Sabah*, March 27, 2017, <https://www.dailysabah.com/war-on-terror/2017/03/28/us-army-report-confirms-direct-pkk-ypg-links-in-syria>; Patrick Clawson (ed.), *Syrian Kurds as a U.S. Ally: Cooperation & Complications*, (The Washington Institute For Near East Policy, 2016), 4.

how the fears on “ending in wrong hands” were neglected. Unfortunately, the majority of military aid went to the PYD/YPG, some of which ended up in the wrong hands, to be used in Turkey by the PKK. Furthermore, with the territorialization, the PYD/YPG dug a network of tunnels along the borders between Turkey and Syria to be used as a passageway by the PKK.¹⁸⁰

Turkey, suffering from PKK terrorism, on several occasions reiterated its security concerns to its allies and requested from them to recognize those legitimate concerns and identify strategies and actions accordingly. However, the fear of radicalization, and the willingness of the PYD/YPG to fight against radicalization, led the West, to prefer them as the only viable option that should be supported since they were unwilling to send their soldiers to the ground thanks to the fear created by the violence of DAESH. The PYD/YPG was willing to fight against radicalization in exchange for controlling the cleaned territories and refused to fight against the regime. In preferring and employing The PYD/YPG as a proxy, the U.S. tacitly and inadvertently recognized its influence in its strategy making at the expense of souring its relations with its traditional ally. Even as DAESH began to degrade, an image-making campaign started to appear in the Western media to legitimize a terrorist organization as the women militants of YPJ appeared on the front pages of famous French magazines such as *Elle* and *Marie Claire*.¹⁸¹

¹⁸⁰ “Tunnel on Turkey’s Border with Syria Exposes PKK, PYD Links,” *Daily Sabah*, November 5, 2016, <https://www.dailysabah.com/war-on-terror/2016/11/05/tunnel-on-turkeys-border-with-syria-exposes-pkk-pyd-links>.

¹⁸¹ Ögür and Baykal, “Understanding “Foreign Policy” of the PYD/YPG as a Non-State Actor in Syria and Beyond” 68; Elizabeth Griffin, “These Remarkable Women Are Fighting ISIS. It’s Time You Know Who They Are,” *Marie Claire*, October 30, 2014, <http://www.marieclaire.com/culture/news/a6643/these-are-the-women-battling-isis/>.

ENTERING MANBIJ AND RAQQAH WITH PYD/YPG

The distrust in that period began to grow with the passage of the PYD/YPG to the west of the Euphrates River, when they launched an offensive to capture the mostly Arab-populated town of Manbij in June 2016. Turkey long before the PYD/YPG's expansion to the western Euphrates declared it would constitute a redline for Ankara,¹⁸² as it would confirm the intent to create a terror corridor in its 911 km long southern border. Moreover, when considered together with the Iraq border, this would mean the control of a 1,294 km long southern border by a terrorist organization which would further exacerbate the already existing security concerns. On the other hand, the U.S., to appease and diffuse the concerns of Turkey, pledged that the PYD/YPG would be withdrawn as soon as the town was cleared from DAESH. However, the failure to keep its promises, including the collection of delivered weapons, triggered the process of Ankara's strategy change in August 2016 in the immediate aftermath of the July 2016 coup attempt. The military reflection of this strategy change will be discussed in the following sections.

But the most significant rift between the U.S. and Turkey surfaced in the aftermath of the Operation Euphrates Shield. Raqqa constituted a testbed for a U.S.-TUR joint operation to clear DAESH from a mostly Arab-populated city, and the capital of the caliphate. When the debates on the scope and composition of the forces that will conduct the Raqqa Operation started, Turkey proposed, as a NATO ally, strategic partner, and coalition member, to undertake it jointly with the U.S., instead of with the PYD/YPG which was rebranded as the Syrian Democratic Forces in October 2015. Rebranding the PYD/YPG as the SDF "provided legal and political cover for the US to support it without officially backing the PKK, still on Washington's terrorism

¹⁸² "Davutoglu: 'Turkey's Position Is Clear: The YPG Will Not Pass to the West of Euphrates River and the East of Afrin'" *Hurriyet Daily News*, February 15, 2016.

list.”¹⁸³ However, this proposal fell on deaf ears, and the U.S. rejected the proposal on the basis of stating that the SDF was “most capable of acting swiftly to isolate Raqqa.”¹⁸⁴ Already there were reports pointing to the possible negative implications not only on the relations between the allies,¹⁸⁵ but also how the local population was unwelcoming to an operation by the PYD/YPG-dominated SDF, fearing that the SDF would change the demographics of the Arab-populated city.¹⁸⁶ However, Turkey’s proposals on joint operations, the concerns over arming the SDF and that the delivered weapons would end up in the wrong hands,¹⁸⁷ the long-term implications on the local society which was anxious,¹⁸⁸ or the warning reports that appeared in Western capitals were taken into account. Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım clearly articulated Turkey’s concerns: “If it [the United States] insists on carrying on this operation with terror organizations, our relations will be harmed – that is clear. Because it will show that they value terror organizations more than us.”¹⁸⁹ Furthermore, arming a terrorist-affiliated group further concerned Turkey. Appeasing statements, the cosmetic guarantees such as close monitoring and reporting the inventory of the

¹⁸³ Aron Lund, “Syria’s Kurds at the Center of America’s Anti-Jihadi Strategy,” *Syria in Crisis for Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, December 2, 2015, <http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=62158>.

¹⁸⁴ David Kenner, Molly O’toole, “The Race to Raqqa Could Cost Trump Turkey,” *Foreign Policy*, March 21, 2017, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/03/21/the-race-to-raqqa-could-cost-trump-turkey/>.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

¹⁸⁶ Andrew Tabler, “Eyeing Raqqa: A Tale of Four Tribes,” *The Washington Institute Policy Notes* 39, (March 2017); Kyle W. Orton, “The Error of Arming the Syrian Kurds,” *New York Times*, June 6, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/06/opinion/syria-kurds-isis-raqqa.html>.

¹⁸⁷ Serkan Demirtas, “Turkey Warns US, Russia over Arms Supply to Syrian Kurds,” *Hurriyet Daily News*, October 14, 2015.

¹⁸⁸ Haid Haid, “The Ramifications of the SDF Governance Plan for Raqqa Post-ISIS,” *The Atlantic Council*, May 11, 2017, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/the-ramifications-of-the-sdf-governance-plan-for-raqqa-post-isis>.

¹⁸⁹ David Kenner, Molly O’Toole, “The Race to Raqqa Could Cost Trump Turkey,” *Foreign Policy*, March 21, 2017, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/03/21/the-race-to-raqqa-could-cost-trump-turkey/>.

supplied weapons, and pledges to recollect them after the operation¹⁹⁰ were far behind Turkey's expectations and weak to alleviate security concerns. All the mentioned concerns and negligence inevitably added new strains to the already growing distrust and consequent questioning of relations.

Even though the U.S. officials stated that the arms were supplied to the SDF coalition, which was created to alleviate Turkish reaction and critique, they ended up in the hands of the PYD/YPG and worse in PKK hands. However, the U.S. officials refused the responsibility of the weapons ending up in wrong hands, obscuring the pledges given to Turkey. Furthermore, they insisted that the arms do not represent a threat to Turkey as they did not have a game-changing technology or operational "qualitative edge."¹⁹¹ This was a sign of the oversimplification of the threats posed by terrorist organizations. The Raqqah operation revealed that covert deliveries were actually arriving to the PYD/YPG. Later on, this was also confirmed by the defected spokesperson of the SDF Talal Silo who admitted that the supplies were going to Safkan from the PKK.¹⁹² Furthermore, a YPG commander stated that "the U.S. had supplied weapons to the group during the Manbij offensive."¹⁹³ With Raqqah, the scope of arms deliveries expanded to include armored vehicles, which was seen as a "significant improvement" by the SDF spokesperson Talal Silo in an interview with Reuters.¹⁹⁴

¹⁹⁰ "Pentagon'dan Silah Listesi," *Hürriyet*, June 23, 2017, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/pentagondan-silah-listesi-40498983>

¹⁹¹ Julian Burger and Fazel Havremy, "US Providing Light Arms to Kurdish-Led Coalition in Syria, Officials Confirm," *The Guardian*, September 29, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/sep/29/syria-us-arms-supply-kurds-turkey>.

¹⁹² "Eski SDG Sözcüsü Talal Silo: ABD Silahları PKK'lı Safkan'a Gidiyordu," *Hürriyet*, December 3, 2017, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/dunya/eski-sdg-sozcusu-talal-silo-abd-silahlari-pkkli-safkana-gidiyordu-40666025>

¹⁹³ Burger and Havremy, "US Providing Light Arms".

¹⁹⁴ Tom Perry, "Syrian Militias Get More U.S. Support for IS Fight, Plan New Phase," *Reuters*, January 31, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-arms/syrian-militias-get-more-u-s-support-for-is-fight-plan-new-phase-idUSKBN15F15S>.

Beyond straining the U.S.-Turkey relations, the Tabqa agreement¹⁹⁵ between the SDF and DAESH that foresaw the handover of the city of Tabqa to the PYD/YPG-dominated SDF without fighting raised suspicion of the dark relations between the two terrorist organizations. The latter was also observed when a deal brokered between the PYD/YPG and DAESH to transport the remaining DAESH militants from Raqqah to Deir al-Zor - disappointingly with the approval of the coalition -¹⁹⁶ to end the operation. The intent behind this deal was to prevent the attrition of PYD/YPG/SDF as the most viable and most effective force of the U.S. Later on, the critiques against the deal between two terrorist organizations was tried to be face-saved with the excuse of preventing civilian casualties and declining the coalition's role in brokering the deal.

Those two agreements and the conditions put forward to the U.S. demonstrated how non-state actors might sideline the basic rules of international law, and how in time, they can leverage a benefactor state-actor for their own causes.¹⁹⁷ In other words, the incidents showcased how non-state actors have no restrictions in using illegitimate methods to legitimize their causes and to revert the mechanism of proxy warfare upside down.

Once Raqqah was cleared by DAESH, it should be noted that this was not achieved by a military victory based on operational effectiveness, Turkey's concerns were once more confirmed as posters of the jailed PKK Leader Öcalan were raised in celebrations, and underpinned with the words of the YPJ commander, "The victory in Raqqa

¹⁹⁵ Lizzie Dearden, "Isis Gives Up Tabqa Dam in Exchange for Fighters' Lives in Deal with US-Backed Forces Advancing on Raqqah," *The Independent*, May 12, 2017, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-syria-raqqa-offensive-advance-tabqa-dam-deal-sdf-kurds-ypg-us-led-coalition-deal-deserted-a7733101.html>.

¹⁹⁶ Quentin Sommerville and Riam Dalati, "Raqqah's Dirty Secret," *BBC News*, November 13, 2017, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/resources/idt-sh/raqqas_dirty_secret.

¹⁹⁷ Burger and Havremy, "US Providing Light Arms".

was a victory for both Öcalan and women against the IS.”¹⁹⁸ In fact, the devastation left behind also confirmed the operational indiscrimination, which was similar to Dresden’s fate.

STRATEGY CHANGE AND ITS MILITARY REFLECTION

What prompted Turkey to change its strategy? Turkey’s strategy in Syria has evolved over time, responding to the changes on the ground, an improvisation to both the miscalculations and the embedded uncertainties of the Syrian crisis, which mutated over time. As the mutation introduced the territorialization/deterritorialization dynamics to Syria, the actors involved changed their strategies to alter the course of the (de)territorialization. Turkey, too, experienced a similar fate and improvised its strategy to mitigate the implications of that factor. Turkey’s initial strategy and its position towards the crisis and developments were shortly discussed in Chapter 1, and the question of how the actors changed their strategies was also discussed in the previous chapter. With the adoption of regime change strategy, in line with the international community, Turkey began to face the effects of the transnationalization and spillover of the crisis into Turkey, with increasing attacks from the regime. As the regime authority began to erode with the hesitance observed to intervene and revert that process, the non-state actors began to fill the power vacuum that was created with the withdrawal of the regime. The territorialization of the PYD/YPG, which was initially the result of the intentional withdrawal of the Assad regime, changed its character with the territorialization of DAESH in Syria and continued its process of territorialization with the assistance of the United States. They capitalized on the developments on the ground and continued to be a proxy first for the regime and later for the United States.

¹⁹⁸ “Kurdish Fighters Raise Flag of PKK Leader in Centre of Raqqa,” *Middle East Eye*, October 19, 2017, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/kurdish-fighters-raise-flag-pkk-leader-centre-raqqa>.

Out of this (de)territorialization, Turkey suffered military and civilian casualties by the atrocities of the regime, DAESH, and the PYD/YPG. The extent of the territorialization corresponded to the level of atrocities they carried out in Turkey and the level of threat they posed. Turkey, while watching the developments on the ground, tried to define a strategy that could halt their spillover into the country, and tried to define a strategy that could curtail the negative implications of the situation. However, first, the preference of moving in line with the international community, and then, the uncertainty existing on the ground led Turkey to be hesitant, as well. Turkey's hesitance disappeared as the territorialization of threat became evident and directly impacted Turkey with terrorist attacks.

Turkey's strategy showed a significant shift in line with the territorialization which was hesitant and defensive in nature at the beginning and later turned assertive and decisive with the aim of eliminating the threats at their origin. The outward reflection of this shift was the use of military power in Syria. The subsequent parts will discuss how this shift appeared, what the objectives and scope of the operations were, and the extent to which the intended outcome could be actualized.

OPERATION SHAH EUPHRATES (OSE) (FEBRUARY 21-22, 2015)

Turkey's hesitance and the will to act in cooperation with the international community and coalition showed itself with the Operation Shah Euphrates (OES), which was conducted as an evacuation operation of the tomb of Suleiman Shah, the grandfather of Osman, the founder of the Ottoman Empire. The site of the tomb is accepted as a Turkish shrine outside of the country's national borders. The unprecedented territorialization of DAESH in Syria began to threaten the historical site, which was guarded by 40 soldiers of the Turkish Armed Forces without direct territorial access to Turkey.

The operational objective was defined as the relocation of the tomb facing the increasing risk of an DAESH attack. Although several warnings were already made, beforehand, to prevent any provocative attack on the historical site, DAESH continued to threaten the site. Within this context, the operation was planned and conducted on the night of February 21-22, 2015 with the participation of 39 tanks, 57 armored vehicles, and 572 soldiers. Prime Minister Davutoğlu announced on February 22 that the operation had unfolded in a safe way, all the relics and the tomb were evacuated, and that the old mausoleum was destroyed to prevent the possibility of it being used by DAESH. Nevertheless, this defensive operation was rejected by the Syrian government which condemned the incursion as an act of “flagrant aggression.”¹⁹⁹

Domestically, the operation was widely criticized by the opposition parties and unwelcome by the public opinion in Turkey, as well. Critiques focused on the preference of the route which passed through the west of Ayn al-Arab, controlled by the PYD/YPG at the time; the actual risks and threats that DAESH posed and whether they were exaggerated; the evacuation of the tomb instead of reinforcing the site; and the establishment of an air corridor to sustain the site instead of evacuation. The relocation of the tomb from 25 km east of Manbij to a location 200 m from the Turkish border in the village of Eshme, 22 km west of the PYD/YPG controlled Ayn al-Arab, was perceived as a retreat from the Syrian crisis. It was even perceived as a “failed retreat in strategic terms” which led Turkey to withdraw from the Middle East, thus scaling down its reach to its defined boundaries.²⁰⁰ Furthermore, the execution phase was also criticized for tacit recognition of the PYD/YPG as an interlocutor in the region thus opening grounds

¹⁹⁹ “Turkey Enters Syria to Remove Precious Suleyman Shah Tomb, *BBC News*, February 22, 2015, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-31572257>.

²⁰⁰ Dilek, “2016 Sonu İtibariyle Türkiye’nin İflas Eden Ortadoğu Politikası”, 57.

to be exploited for their cause.²⁰¹ Irrespective of the statements of PM Davutoğlu's intent to return the tomb to its original location, the opposition perceived it as a loss of territory which was severely criticized with the words of Republican People's Party General Secretary Gürsel Tekin who said, "For the first time in our 90-year-history as a republic we have surrendered our own soil without a fight."²⁰² Regarding the role and the scope of the PYD/YPG's involvement in the execution process, PM Davutoğlu's reply confirmed that the PYD/YPG was informed before the operation to prevent any unexpected clash with them.²⁰³ It was an attempt to constrain the role of the PYD/YPG and to prevent it from capitalizing on the operation for propaganda purposes. Turkish General Staff also declined the claims that the TAF cooperated with the PYD/YPG.²⁰⁴ Irrespective of the intent on the Turkish side, Öcalan tried to capitalize from the ongoing domestic debates to legitimize 'Rojava' and elevate the informing to co-opting by promoting a discourse of "Eshme spirit"²⁰⁵ which created a grave disturbance in Turkish public opinion.

One of the most apparent critiques came a year after the operation when the contacts of the U.S. officials with the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs to convince them of the need for the evacuation and relocation of the tomb were revealed, and the daily *Hürriyet* asked the question whether it was a U.S. trap to dislodge the sovereign Turkish soil to open space for the PYD/YPG.²⁰⁶ In fact, the capture of Man-

²⁰¹ Ibid., 56.

²⁰² Aysel Alp, "Gürsel Tekin: 'Şah' Değil 'Mat' Operasyonu," *Hürriyet*, February 22, 2015, <https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/gursel-tekin-sah-degil-mat-operasyonu-28267972>.

²⁰³ "Başbakan Davutoğlu: PYD'ye Bildirdik," *Hürriyet*, February 24, 2015, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/dunya/basbakan-davutoglu-pydye-bildirdik-28289739>.

²⁰⁴ "Genelkurmay: TSK ile PYD/PKK İşbirliği İddiası Gerçek Dışı," *Hürriyet*, March 23, 2015, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/genelkurmay-tsk-ile-pyd-pkk-isbirligi-iddiasi-gercek-disi-28529221>.

²⁰⁵ Zeynep Gürçanlı, "Öcalan'ın Eşme Ruhu Çıkışı," *Hürriyet*, March 21, 2015, <https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/ocalanin-esme-ruhu-cikisi-28517719>.

²⁰⁶ "Süleyman Şah Türbesi Türkiye'ye Tuzak mıydı?," *Hürriyet*, September 2, 2016, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/dunya/suleyman-sah-turbesi-turkiyeye-tuzak-miydi-40214058>.

bij by the PYD/YPG in July 2016 can be accepted as a confirming factor, which would have been difficult if the Turkish garrison would have been kept and reinforced in its original place. In other words, the PYD/YPG's control of Manbij in 2016 demonstrated how the defensive operations can open space for the territorialization of non-state actors. This operation, whose character carries the features of a defensive military posture, inadvertently removed one of the pretexts to conduct an operation into Syria in order to curb the territorialization of non-state actors.

OPERATION EUPHRATES SHIELD (OES) (AUGUST 24, 2016-MARCH 31, 2017)

The Operation Euphrates Shield (OES) signified the change of strategy in Ankara's approach to the Syrian case. What prompted the strategy change was shortly discussed above, namely the territorialization of the threats by both DAESH and the PYD/YPG and their spillover into Turkey that manifested themselves with an increasing number of deadly terrorist attacks. In terms of the territorialization of threats, the capture of Tal Abyad in June 2015 and the creation of a strip in its southern borders diffused Ankara's ambiguity and elevated its concerns to the level of a direct threat. The materialization of this threat perception demonstrated itself with an increasing number of terror attacks in different Turkish cities during 2015. Between June 7 and July 28, 2015, in 51 days, 657 terror incidents took place, including deadly attacks. Even, as far back as July 15, 2015, one of the PKK leaders, Bese Hozat, labeled the process as a "revolutionist war" against Turkey intended to replicate the 'Rojava' model in Turkey.²⁰⁷

The fights in Tal Abyad, which ended with the deterritorialization of DAESH and the territorialization of the PYD/YPG by establishing a strip from Ayn al-Arab to Hasakah provinces, removed any suspi-

²⁰⁷ Bese Hozat, "Yeni Süreç, Devrimci Halk Savaşı Sürecidir," *Özgür Gündem*, July 15, 2015, <http://www.ozgurgundem.com/yazi/133642/yeni-surec-devrimci-halk-savasi-surecidir>.

cion and ambiguity in Ankara about the intention of the PYD/YPG. It rang the alarm bells, increased awareness, clarified the picture, and diffused confusion in Ankara about the situation, which led to the conclusion that the PYD/YPG is more dangerous for national security than DAESH. During the Tal Abyad fights, the displacement of 23,000 people from the Arab-populated city, who headed into Turkey, confirmed these concerns, as the PYD/YPG started to implement demographic engineering²⁰⁸ as soon as it took control of the city. They also illegally brokered the infiltration of remaining DAESH families into Turkey, thus exporting the threat into Turkey.

As a result of both the fight between DAESH and the PYD/YPG, and the infiltration of DAESH into Turkey, DAESH started to terrorize Turkey firstly out of revenge toward the PYD/YPG in different places and to expand the fight's front. The outcome was the significant increase in the number of attacks: at least 14 attacks between 2014 and 2017, which caused the death of over 300 civilians and even more injuries. DAESH's attacks in Diyarbakir on June 5, 2015, in Suruç on July 20, 2015, and in Ulus on October 10, 2015, primarily targeted the Kurdish population and activities linked to the pro-Kurdish party in Turkey, the HDP. These attacks not only aimed to respond to the PYD/YPG's advance but also inadvertently intended to undermine social cohesion in Turkey. After the Suruç attacks in July 2015, the co-head of the HDP Figen Yüksekdağ's statement that "we rely on the YPJ, the YPG, and the PYD," not only caused a fierce reaction but also revealed the intent to replicate the 'Rojava' practice in Turkey. In fact, after DAESH's Suruç attack, the PKK initiated its attacks against the Turkish Security Forces, capitalizing from DAESH's attacks in order to resume its attacks against Turkey after three years of inaction. The PYD/YPG managed to control 632 km out of the 911 km long border strip by the end of 2015. From

²⁰⁸ "Under Kurdish Rule: Abuses in PYD-Run Enclaves of Syria," *Human Rights Watch*, (2014), https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/syria0614_kurds_ForUpload.pdf.

that point onward, Turkey tailored its strategy to cut off the corridor and declared the PYD/YPG's crossing into the west of Euphrates as a redline.²⁰⁹ The formation of a PYD/YPG corridor could bring about long-lasting and resource-draining security threats to Turkey beyond cutting off Turkey's direct links to Middle Eastern societies and states, eventually leaving Turkey vulnerable to the PYD/YPG initiative to build constructive relations in the region. From Ankara's perspective, the initiative was intended to build a belt that contains and isolates Turkey from the region.

Within this strategic calculus, the Operation Euphrates Shield (OES) was launched on August 24, 2016 in conformity of Article 51 of the UN Charter which recognizes the "right of self-defense" as Northern Syria had become the "key launching pad" of the deadly terrorist attacks conducted in Ankara by the PYD/YPG in February 2016, and in Gaziantep by DAESH at a wedding gathering on August 20, 2016. These terrorist attacks prompted the execution of the strategy change. Lastly, to target Turkey's tourism and degrade its international image, another terror attack targeted Istanbul Atatürk Airport on June 28, 2016 causing 45 deaths and injuring 230. One of the major obstacles for the operations was the ongoing jet crisis with Russia, blocking Turkey's air operation into Syria. After the crisis resolved with Moscow, and an understanding was reached with the U.S., the operation was immediately launched.

The objectives of the operation were identified as ensuring border security by deterritorializing the terrorist organizations, and interrupting and disrupting the PYD/YPG attempts to connect the east and west Euphrates that was designed to isolate Turkey from the Middle East by establishing a "terror corridor" that would be used for a "war

²⁰⁹ Ögür and Baykal, "Understanding 'Foreign Policy' of the PYD/YPG as a Non-State Actor in Syria and Beyond", 63.

of attrition.”²¹⁰ However, the immediate goal was the clearance of DAESH from Turkey’s border while Turkey was still in control of the strip between Azez and Jerablus. However, the scope of the operation, particularly the depth, became a point of contention between the U.S. and Turkey as the U.S. side seemed to disagree with expanding the operations beyond a 20 km depth from the borders. The attack on two M60A3 tanks belonging to the Turkish Armed Forces by the PYD/YPG firing MILAN and 9M133 Kornet ATGMs, which were delivered by the U.S., and the retaliatory attack by Turkey killing 25 PYD/YPG terrorists²¹¹ caused the deployment of the U.S. Special Forces along the Sajura river that aimed to block the advance into Manbij and inadvertently caused the peeling off of some FSA elements.²¹²

After Turkey decided to expand to cover al-Bab, not only the U.S., but the PYD/YPG and the regime raced to take control of the city. As the distrust between Turkey and the U.S. had already been growing, why was the U.S. discontent with the expansion of the OES to clear al-Bab from DAESH? The same question can be asked in a different way: did the U.S. prefer the deterritorialization of DAESH only through the territorialization of the PYD/YPG? The answers to these questions seemed to revert back to the already deteriorating relations between Turkey and the U.S. However, by initiating the Operation Noble Arch, which overlapped with the operational scope of OES, the U.S. preferred to opt for constraining the advances and achievements of the operation. It can be seen as the “testimony to trust deficit.”²¹³

²¹⁰ Murat Yeşiltaş, Merve Seren, and Necdet Özçelik, “Operation Euphrates Shield: Implementation and Lessons Learned,” SETA, (2017), https://setav.org/en/assets/uploads/2017/11/R97_Euphrates.pdf.

²¹¹ “Firat Kalkanı Operasyonunda 25 YPG’li Öldürüldü”, *Euronews*, August 28, 2016, <http://tr.euronews.com/2016/08/28/firat-kalkani-operasyon-nda-25-ypg-li-olduruldu>.

²¹² Dilek, “2016 Sonu İtibariyle Türkiye’nin İflas Eden Ortadoğu Politikası”, 8.

²¹³ Sinan Ülgen and Can Kasapoglu, “Operation Euphrates Shield: Aims and Gains,” January 19, 2017, *Carnegie Europe*, <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2017/01/19/operation-euphrates-shield-aims-and-gains-pub-67754>.

The U.S. guaranteed the PYD/YPG's withdrawal to the east of Euphrates on August 28, 2016, and the operational advance axis, which was heading to the Manbij, consequentially changed towards the east. Once the operational axis changed Russian air operations on al-Bab and Manbij not only did it disrupt DAESH's supply lines, but also demonstrated how Moscow was willing to improve relations with Turkey. Turkey faced a dilemma: on the one side, a historical rival that was supporting its operations and on the other hand, its strategic partner that was striving to hinder its operations. The postponement of the Raqqah operation, which was under discussion at the time, further complicated the operation and caused the operation's prolongation. If Turkey had found the support that was already being given to the PYD/YPG, the operation could have ended much earlier, since the postponement gave DAESH a chance to concentrate its focus and forces to the OES theater both operationally and logistically.

The operation finished on March 31, 2017, achieving to clear DAESH from the borders, killing 3,500 terrorists, liberating al-Bab, facilitating the local population's return, and disrupting the PYD/YPG plan to build a corridor. Before the end of the operation was officially announced, Erdoğan already set Manbij and Raqqah as the new targets for future operations.²¹⁴

OPERATION OLIVE BRANCH (OOB) (JANUARY 20-MARCH 24, 2018)

The objective of keeping the PYD/YPG away from the borders and at the east of Euphrates, unfortunately, could not be secured with the OES, during which they managed to head and capture Manbij and Tal

²¹⁴ "Erdoğan'dan Rakka Açıklaması: El Bab'dan Sonra Durmak Yok," *BBC Turkish*, Feb. 12, 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/turkce/38948547>. "Erdoğan'ın 'Sürprizleri Var': 'Fırat Kalkani' Bitti, Yeni Harekatlara Yeni İsimler Vereceğiz," *Diken*, April 3, 2017, <http://www.diken.com.tr/erdoganin-surprizleri-var-firat-kalkani-bitti-yeni-harekatlara-yeni-isimler-vereciz/>.

Rifat. Through Manbij, they even attempted to capture al-Bab that could link Afrin and through the Afrin-Tel Rifat-al-Bab-Ayn al-Arab-Manbij axis, therefore enclaving the Azaz-Jerablus strip. However, the capture of al-Bab by the FSA supported by the TAF brought the demise of the PYD/YPG's plans, though left al-Bab vulnerable to the PYD/YPG infiltrations. In other words, the PYD/YPG retained the hope of creating a strip south of Turkey and reaching the Mediterranean Sea. This meant gaining agency and expanding autonomy, which would be translated into acting independently from the U.S. Apart from these geopolitical concerns, the nature of arms deliveries and the supplies had expanded substantially. Notably, the decision to deliver heavy weaponry consisting of MANPADs and ATGMs elevated the capabilities of the PYD/YPG to the level of the Lebanese Hezbollah. Furthermore, the decision to create a 30,000-strong YPG border guard with training by the U.S. generated public discontent in Turkey and pressured the government to act beforehand.²¹⁵

This changing nature of weaponry and sophisticated organization which signaled the intent to establish a sort of statehood in time led Turkey to adopt a strategy that was tailored to eliminate and degrade them before reaching a level of threat that could pose a serious and lasting threat. Such a threat could eventually derail Turkey's resources and transfer their secessionist agenda to Turkey. Furthermore, the Afrin region became a drug production and smuggling hub for Europe which was also used to finance the PYD/YPG.²¹⁶

Kidnapping children aged 12 and recruiting them as militants was also another reason that caused discontent in the local population. This

²¹⁵ Can Kasapoğlu and Selim Ülgen, "Operation Olive Branch: A Political-Military Assessment," *EDAM Research Report*, (2018), 14, <https://edam.org.tr/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Operation-Olive-Branch-01.pdf>.

²¹⁶ "Bakan Soylu, 'Afrin'de Zeytin Dalı Harekatı'nı Yapmamış Olsaydık Afrin, PKK Tarafından Dünyanın En Büyük Uyuşturucu Merkezi Haline Getiriliyordu," *Star Gazetesi*, January 23, 2020, <https://www.star.com.tr/guncel/dunyanin-en-buyuk-uyusturucu-merkezi-haline-getireceklerdi-haber-1509114/>.

tactic was later confirmed by the PYD/YPG and the UN's agreement at the UN Geneva Office to end the recruitment of child soldiers in its ranks.²¹⁷ As was confirmed with the quick and welcoming control of the urban center of Afrin within a short period of time, the local population, which ironically the SDF/PYD/YPG claimed to represent and govern, was in support of the TAF operation in the region despite long efforts to change the demography of the region.²¹⁸

Apart from the aforementioned contextual reasons, the scope and objectives of Operation Olive Branch were defined as the elimination of PYD/YPG elements from the Turkish border; to prevent their plans to establish a corridor; to ensure Syrian territorial integrity; to enhance the role of Turkey in the negotiations for the future of Syria; and to convince the U.S. to cease supporting the PYD/YPG with a goal of re-establishing grounds for convergence on the PYD/YPG discontent with the U.S. On January 13, 2018, President Erdoğan unequivocally signaled the forthcoming operation when he stated, "Don't ever doubt it. One night we may arrive suddenly."²¹⁹

Within this framework, the operation began on January 20, 2018, with massive and overwhelming air operations, which primarily targeted the subterranean tunnel structure, logistical buildup, and strongholds in order to paralyze the PYD/YPG from the very beginning. The follow-on phase continued with a multi-axis siege incursion from mountainous areas to eliminate the resistance. The last phase consisted of the urban warfare phase, which lasted five days. Around 8,000-10,000 PYD/YPG militants were considered to be positioned in the

²¹⁷ "Turkey Condemns UN Child Soldier Deal with PKK-Controlled SDF," *Daily Sabah*, July 02, 2019, <https://www.dailysabah.com/war-on-terror/2019/07/02/un-signs-deal-with-pkk-controlled-sdf-group-on-child-soldier.s>

²¹⁸ Fabrice Balanche, "From Qamishli to Qamishlo. A Trip to Rojava's New Capital", *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, May 2017. <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/from-qamishli-to-qamishlo-a-trip-to-rojavas-new-capital>.

²¹⁹ "Erdoğan: Bir Gece Ansızın Gelebiliriz," Anadolu Agency, January 14, 2018, <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/gunun-basliklari/cumhurbaskani-erdogan-bir-gece-ansizin-gelebiliriz/1030766>.

region together with the numerous DAESH militants who had surrendered to the SDF/PYD/YPG during the Raqqah and Deir al-Zor operations and transported to Afrin to fight against Turkey. During the operation, more than 4,000 PYD/YPG terrorists were eliminated within two-month-long operations, emptying the hopes that Turkey would suffer a major blow from the PYD/YPG.

During the operation one of the major components was the disinformation campaign undertaken by the PYD/YPG accusing Turkey of human right violations, alleging the use of prohibited weapons, and massive civilian casualties. However, all the claims were answered by a brochure prepared by the state department that disproved all the allegations.²²⁰ This disinformation campaign revealed the Marxist/Leninist roots of the PKK terrorist organization which was trained by the Soviets. Regarding the criticism and disinformation that accused Turkey of undertaking a demographic change of Afrin, Erdoğan stated, “The whole issue is this: 55 percent of Afrin is Arab, 35 percent are the Kurds who were later relocated, and about 7 percent are Turkmen... [Our goal is] to give Afrin back to its rightful owners.”²²¹ The post-operation normalization measures facilitated the return to the normal rhythm of life after long years of suppression.

One of the most important outcomes of the OOB was the recovery of the TAF operational effectiveness and confidence. Compared to the 7-month-long OES, the two-month-long OOB revealed how the TAF operational effectiveness was restored by increasing the operational tempo more than three times. This fact, delivered a strong message to the U.S. that was skeptical about the TAF operational effectiveness and convinced the United States of Turkey’s concerns and the seriousness

²²⁰ “Zeytin Dalı Harekâtı’na Karşı Terör Örgütü Mensupları ve Yandaşları Tarafından Sosyal Medyada Yürütülen Dezenformasyon Faaliyetleri,” *Basın Yayın Enformasyon Genel Müdürlüğü*, 2018, <http://nurnberg.bk.mfa.gov.tr/Content/assets/consulate/images/local-Cache/1/428736f7-5338-4e17-b696-bc0058718296.pdf>

²²¹ Dorian Jones, “Turkey Eyes Refugees Turning to Afrin, Syria,” *Voice of America*, March 8, 2018,

of the measures that could be taken to revert the territorialization of a terrorist organization “at all costs and by all means.”

OPERATION PEACE SPRING (OPS) (OCTOBER 9-17, 2019)

The road to Operation Peace Spring (OPS) followed a long track and discussions between Washington and Ankara revolving mainly around the establishment of a 20-mile-deep (32 km) safe zone along the 460 km borders at the east of Euphrates. For a long time, Turkey was keen on offering the establishment of a safe zone that would allow the settlement of refugees and prevent the terrorist infiltration into Turkey. However, the U.S. in order not to disappoint the PYD/YPG, either stayed aloof or tried to ease Turkey’s security concerns. In fact, the U.S. posture on a safe zone demonstrated how territorialized non-state actors might condition the behavior of state actors at the expense of embittering relations with traditional allies.

The events leading to the OPS surfaced with President Erdoğan’s statements that Turkey will carry out a military operation towards the east of the Euphrates, covering the areas stretching from Ayn al-Arab (Kobane) to Qamishli and adding that “we have completed our preparations” on December 12, 2018. On December 19, after a phone call with President Erdoğan, President Trump announced via Twitter the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Syria. However, his decision caused a fierce reaction within the U.S. criticizing the administration for the betrayal of Kurds and bringing about the resignation of U.S. Secretary of Defense James Mattis and Special Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter DAESH Brett McGurk.²²² Following the domestic political pressures, President Trump stepped back and announced that the withdrawal might take a month. On January 13, 2019, he sent mixed messages threatening Turkey again with economic devastation, and at

²²² “US Envoy Brett McGurk Quits over Trump Syria Pullout,” *BBC News*, December 23, 2018, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-4666138.4>

the same time, announcing the creation of the 20-mile safe zone. Pressures on the U.S. president also revealed the internal discussions and differences within the administration towards the PYD/YPG. Trump's National Security Advisor John Bolton reiterated that the withdrawal was conditioned on the protection of the PYD/YPG and the complete elimination of DAESH. Bolton's message on January 3, 2019, during his Israel trip, was significant. He stated, "We don't think the Turks ought to undertake military action that's not fully coordinated with and agreed to by the United States, at a minimum they don't endanger our troops."²²³ Erdoğan reacted by not meeting with Bolton despite the fact that it was scheduled and that he was present in Ankara during Bolton's visit to Turkey. Later on, he explained his decision to the parliament by stating that "it [was] not possible for us to swallow the message Bolton gave from Israel."²²⁴ The discussions between the parties continued reaffirming mutual security but hesitating to materialize these assurances on the ground. For example, on February 16, U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and the Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu held two-day discussions to resolve the contentions in Syria, which ended with a joint statement. In the joint statement, the U.S. and Turkey "reaffirmed their mutual and unequivocal commitment to each other's security and to the preservation of Syria's territorial integrity" and reaffirmed their joint combat against all forms of terrorism. This appeared as Turkey and the United States reiterating their resolve to fight against "DAESH, the PKK, al-Qaeda and all other terror organizations and their extensions."²²⁵ However,

²²³ Steve Holland, "Bolton Says Turkey Must Not Attack Kurdish Fighters Once U.S. Leaves Syria," *Reuters*, January 6, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-usa-syria/bolton-says-turkey-must-not-attack-kurdish-fighters-once-u-s-leaves-syria-idUSKCN1P0090>.

²²⁴ Alex Ward, "How America's Relationship with Turkey Fell Apart," *Vox*, April 11, 2019, <https://www.vox.com/world/2019/4/11/18292070/usa-turkey-trump-Erdoğan-s400>

²²⁵ "US and Turkey to Cooperate in Syria's Liberated Zones," *Hurriyet Daily News*, February 18, 2018, <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/us-and-turkey-to-cooperate-in-syrias-liberated-zones-mattis-127499>.

these reciprocal reaffirmations and mutual understanding continued in the upcoming months without producing any concrete outcomes that could alleviate Turkish security concerns and steps showing a change in the U.S. posture on the PYD/YPG.

Finally, Turkey and the U.S. met again in August 2019 to set out a safe zone controlled jointly by the two countries, though Turkey insisted that the control of the safe zone should be undertaken by Ankara and that it should have a 32-km depth from the border. However, when the plan offered to the U.S. was leaked it became evident that what had been offered was far behind the Turkish demands, as it left a 5-km-deep strip to the Turkish control and prevented the entry of Turkish forces to the cities controlled by the PYD/YPG, and other vague terms.²²⁶ Nevertheless, in order to ease the tensions with the U.S., Turkey agreed on a plan to set up a joint operations center in Turkey and to undertake joint patrols in the established safe zone.²²⁷ However, as the two countries commenced joint patrols, the outcomes did not meet Ankara's expectations. President Erdoğan complained about the joint patrols and activities and warned that "if there is no result, we will put our own action plan into operation."²²⁸ He gave the U.S. two weeks' time to commence an operation into Syria to establish a safe zone after stating that "we have not achieved any of the results we desired" and adding "Turkey cannot lose even a single day on this issue."²²⁹ In the meantime, FM Çavuşoğlu underlined the same failure and dissatisfaction with the deal reached with

²²⁶ "US and Turkey to Cooperate in Syria's Liberated Zones," *Hürriyet Daily News*, February 18, 2018, <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/us-and-turkey-to-cooperate-in-syrias-liberated-zones-mattis-127499>.

²²⁷ Carlotta Gall, "U.S. and Turkey Avoid Conflict by Agreeing on Buffer Zone in Syria," *The New York Times*, August 7, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/07/world/middleeast/us-turkey-peace-corridor-syria.html>.

²²⁸ "Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan'dan Flaş Sözler: Eylül Ayı Bitmeden Güvenli Bölge Oluşturulmazsa...", *Hürriyet*, September 8, 2019, <https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/cumhurbaskani-erdogandan-flas-sozler-eylul-ayi-bitmeden-guvenli-bolge-olusturulmazsa-41324985>.

²²⁹ Ibid.

the U.S. relying on the information coming from the field²³⁰ and blamed the steps taken as “cosmetic.”²³¹ The dissatisfaction despite the undertaken joint patrols that remained far behind Turkey’s expectations, led to Erdoğan to accuse the U.S. side of creating a “safe zone for the terror organization.”²³²

The reactions towards the U.S.-Turkey deal on the creation of the safe zone were significant. While Iran blamed the U.S. of making “dangerous plans”²³³ for the region, and while Russia rejected the creation of “spheres of influence”²³⁴ in Syria, in the U.S. it was reported as a “score” for American diplomacy²³⁵ which tried to adopt, somehow naïvely, a mediator role between Ankara and a terrorist organization. In other words, while Russian FM acknowledged Ankara’s security concerns by stating that “Turkey [is] suffering from an infiltration of terrorists coming from territory controlled by the U.S.,”²³⁶ the U.S. was primarily concerned about its reliability in the eyes of the PYD/YPG and sending wrong messages to its partners.²³⁷ However, this concern was at the expense of its traditional ally, which was referred as a “strategic partner.”

²³⁰ Gordon Libold and Nancy A. Youssef, “US Officials Are Worried about the Turkish Foray into Syria,” *Wall Street Journal*, October 3, 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-officials-are-worried-about-turkey-foray-into-syria-11570103533>.

²³¹ “Turkish FM Calls ‘So-Called Ally’ US Steps in Syria Safe Zone Bid ‘Cosmetic,’” *BBC Monitoring*, September 10, 2019.

²³² “Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan’dan Flaş Sözler,” *Hürriyet*, September 8, 2019.

²³³ “Iran’s Rouhani Criticises US for Making ‘Dangerous Plans’ for Syria,” *BBC Monitoring*, September 16, 2019.

²³⁴ “Putin Warns against ‘Spheres of Influence’ in Syria,” *BBC Monitoring*, September 16, 2019.

²³⁵ David Ignatius, “Score One for American Diplomacy,” *The Washington Post*, September 10, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2019/09/10/score-one-american-diplomacy/>.

²³⁶ Betül Yürük, “Lavrov Turkey’s Desire for Safe Zone Justified: Lavrov,” *Anadolu Agency*, September 28, 2019, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/turkey-s-desire-for-safe-zone-justified-lavrov/1596399>

²³⁷ Libold and Youssef, “US Officials Are Worried about the Turkish Foray into Syria,”

The tensions continued with the threatening messages arriving from Washington, while heavy-handed steps were taken to delay, if not deter, Turkey's possible military operation. However, the decisiveness in Ankara and military buildup led Washington to review its posture instead of risking ending up in a military confrontation with its NATO ally, and decided to reposition its forces outside the safe-zone following a phone call between the two presidents.²³⁸ The phone call was surprisingly followed by another tweet by Trump stating, "I will totally destroy and obliterate the Economy of Turkey" if anything happens that disturbs him.²³⁹

The deal by the two presidents centered on the future of DAESH and caused the wide circulation of arguments to pressure Turkey into changing its decision. President Erdoğan, being aware of the disinformation component of the pressure, accepted the responsibility of the DAESH terrorists jailed in the prisons located within the area, and pledged to avoid negatively affecting the operation against DAESH, thus eliminating the main argument being put forward by the supporters of the PYD/YPG. When the PYD/YPG/SDF realized that the operation was imminent and that the U.S. was unable to stop it, it opted for a campaign claiming that any incursion would revert the successful defeat of DAESH, thus exposing the core message of its propaganda campaign. On the other hand, Moscow recognized Turkey's concerns and operation by stating that "Turkey has the legal right to protect its territories from terrorist elements."²⁴⁰ And surprisingly, the Syrian Foreign Ministry aired accusations towards the PYD/YPG for

²³⁸ Josh Wingrove and Selcan Hacıoğlu, "U.S. Won't Stop Turkish Advance Into Syria in Major Policy Shift," *Bloomberg*, October 7, 2019, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-10-07/white-house-says-u-s-forces-won-t-stop-turkish-move-into-syria>

²³⁹ Karen DeYoung, "Furor over Pulling Troops from the Northeast Syria Began with Troubling Phone Call and White House Statement," *The Washington Post*, October 8, 2019.

²⁴⁰ "Turkey Has Right to Protect Its Territories from Terrorism, Kremlin Spox. Peskov Says," *Daily Sabah*, October 2, 2019, <https://www.dailysabah.com/diplomacy/2019/10/02/turkey-has-right-to-protect-its-territories-from-terrorism-kremlin-spox-peskov-says>.

its “criminal and repressive practices” and branded its forces “terrorist separatist militias.”²⁴¹

Finally, Turkey commenced its operation on October 9, 2019, with an objective of primarily liberating the strip between and including the cities Tal-Abyad and Ras al-Ayn. The date symbolically coincided with the anniversary of the extradition of Abdullah Öcalan from Syria in 1998. The objectives of the operation were identified as the clearance of the border strip from PYD/YPG terrorists, and the creation of a safe zone for the resettlement of up to 2 million refugees who already created a heavy burden on Turkey.²⁴² Furthermore, this strip, through the tunnels crossing the border, was being used by the PYD/YPG for illegal smuggling and conducting terrorist activities inside Turkey, as was extensively observed between July 2015 and July 2016. The smuggling activities served both financial and recruiting purposes such as, for example, facilitating the passage of foreign terrorist fighters that joined either the ranks of the PYD/YPG or DAESH. The former served to increase their fighting capacity, and the latter served to ensure their continued existence and continued support from the U.S.

Before the operation commenced, the support continued to flow to the PYD/YPG at an accelerated pace in September 2019.²⁴³ Already several reports revealed the extent and growing sophistication of that support including drone training²⁴⁴ and new fighters trained by the U.S. who had joined the ranks²⁴⁵ while the PYD/YPG continued its

²⁴¹ “Syrian Government Ups Rhetoric against US-Backed Kurds,” *BBC Monitoring*, 150919

²⁴² “Recep Tayyip Erdogan Proposes ‘Safe Zone’ for Refugees in Syria,” *The Guardian*, September 24, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/sep/24/Erdoğan-proposes-plan-for-refugee-safe-zone-in-syria>

²⁴³ “US-Backed Syria Force Receives Military Aid,” *BBC Monitoring*, September 9, 2019; “US-Led Coalition Reinforcements Arrive in Northeast Syria,” *BBC Monitoring*, September 10, 2019.

²⁴⁴ Bilgen, “ABD’liler PKK’ya İHA eğitimi veriyor,” *Yeni Safak*, June 11, 2019, <https://www.yenisafak.com/dunya/abd-liler-pkk-ya-ih-egitimi-veriyor-3494327>

²⁴⁵ “US Trained 700 Syrian Kurdish Fighters to Join YPG - Turkey’s State News Agency,” *BBC Monitoring*, September 4, 2019.

tactics of enforced recruitment.²⁴⁶ As the operation became imminent, the initial response of the PYD/YPG/SDF was to call civilians to the front lines to build a human shield.²⁴⁷ Probably the most disappointing and significant support was the assistance provided to build tunnel networks. U.S. officials and an unnamed officer confirmed that they closely worked with the PYD/YPG/SDF to build defensive networks beneath the key towns throughout northeast Syria as a contingency against a possible Turkish operation.²⁴⁸ The former U.S. officer claimed the tunnels were “defensive in nature” and against the air superiority of the Turkish military, and confirmed that the U.S. and the PYD/YPG/SDF fighters had conducted several drills including the use of other innovative modes of transportation including school buses.²⁴⁹ Gülnur Aybet, an advisor of the Turkish president, in an interview with Christiane Amanpour on CNN stated that 465 tunnels running from Syria into Turkey were destroyed and rightfully asked why those tunnels, if defensive, crossed the border and headed into Turkey.²⁵⁰ From an operational perspective, relying on tunnels, and the urban warfare tactics and training reflected and gave the impression that the PYD/YPG was replicating the United States’ Vietnam experience. Erdoğan announced on October 30, 2019 that the cement used for building the tunnel network was provided by a French firm named Lafarge.

²⁴⁶ “Kurd-Led Forces Detain 30 Syrians near Raqqa for ‘Recruitment’,” *BBC Monitoring*, September 9, 2019.

²⁴⁷ Raf Sanchez, “Syrian Kurds Call Civilians to Front Lines as Turkey Warns Attack Will Begin Soon,” *The Telegraph*, October 9, 2019, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2019/10/09/syrian-kurds-call-civilians-front-lines-turkey-warns-attack/>.

²⁴⁸ Lara Seligman, “Kurdish Fighters Mount Counterattack Using Network of Tunnels,” *Foreign Policy*, October 15, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/10/15/syrian-kurdish-fighters-mount-counterattack-turkish-sdf-network-of-tunnels/#>.

²⁴⁹ Ibid.; Servet Günerigök, “US Trained SDF for Possible Turkish Operation: Report,” October 16, 2019, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/americas/us-trained-sdf-for-possible-turkish-operation-report/1615248>

²⁵⁰ Christiane Amanpour, “Erdoğan Advisor: ‘Allies Have to Be There for Other Allies,’” *CNN*, December 3, 2019, <https://edition.cnn.com/videos/tv/2019/12/03/gulnur-aybet-amanpour-erdogan-turkey-nato-emmanuel-macron.cnn>

On the other hand, renouncing the claims of the PYD/YPG propaganda campaign, the former Head of Military Council in Deir al-Zor stated that “2 million people are awaiting a signal from Turkey”²⁵¹ to revolt against the enforced governance by the SDF/PYD/YPG, confirming the already fragile situation in Deir al-Zor.²⁵² Even though those remarks were distant from the theater, they revealed the tensions among the Arab population against the PYD/YPG. When the operation commenced, the Kurdish Hawks Brigade within the ranks of the National Syrian Army (former FSA) actively participated in liberating Tal Abyad and Ras al-Ayn from the PYD/YPG/SDF.²⁵³

The execution phase of the operation went smoothly and Turkey soon controlled the strip between Tal Abyad and Ras al-Ayn. The operation could have even been executed with a higher operational tempo. However, the overarching objective of not causing civilian casualties and refraining from destroying existing infrastructure slowed down the pace, despite the numerous counter-arguments that appeared on the pro-PYD/YPG media outlets. In fact, given that one of the objectives of the operation was to resettle the refugees and to ensure the return of previously displaced locals to the liberated areas, damaging infrastructure and harming civilians would be counterproductive to the initial operational end-states.

But on the diplomatic side, Turkey faced enormous pressure as the operation controlled the strip within a short period of time. All the parties were disillusioned by the success of the Turkey-backed Syrian

²⁵¹ “2 milyon Ayağa Kalkar,” *Yeni Şafak*, 15 August 2019, <https://www.yenisafak.com/dunya/2-milyon-ayaga-kalkar-3502107>

²⁵² Suleiman Al-Khalidi, “Arabs in Syria’s Deir al-Zor Protest against Ruling Kurdish Militia: Residents,” *Reuters*, April 28, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-kurds-protests/arabs-in-syrias-deir-al-zor-protest-against-ruling-kurdish-militia-residents-idUSKCN1S40RD>; Bassem Mroue, “Anti-Kurdish Protests in East Syria Could Endanger US Plans,” *AP News*, May 9, 2019, <https://apnews.com/3314a11ddb2b40fdbfbc689d812fa080>

²⁵³ “Kürt Şahinleri Tim Komutanı: PKK’nın Zulmünü Bitireceğiz,” *TRT Haber*, October 13, 2019, <https://www.trthaber.com/haber/dunya/kurt-sahinleri-tim-komutani-pkknin-zulmunu-bitirecegiz-435536.html>.

National Army and the failure of the PYD/YPG terrorists. The quick advance in Ras al-Ayn demonstrated how the PYD/YPG was weak and vulnerable both in terms of its fighting capability in the absence of a peer power, and more significantly showed how the existence of the PYD/YPG and the way it ruled created hatred in society in contrast to the welcoming of the Turkish operation.

During the operation, a disinformation campaign aimed at attracting international pressure on Turkey was initiated. Even the former U.S. envoy of the coalition formed to fight DAESH Brett McGurk posted a tweet on October 11, 2019 accusing Turkey of intentionally targeting the U.S. bases, which was proved to be untruthful. However, it demonstrated how he became a part of the information campaign that targeted Turkey and consciously tried to manipulate and endanger the success of the operation.

On October 13, 2019, one of the most significant events occurred with the announcement of a deal between the regime and the PYD/YPG that foresaw the handover of the PYD/YPG-controlled areas to the regime. The regime suddenly appeared to establish control over the territories that it had lost to the PYD/YPG. It started from Manbij, where the U.S. awaited the arrival of Russian military police to control the city together with Ayn al-Arab. From Turkey's perspective, it was perceived as a positive step since the regime was more reliable than the terrorists and was still bound by the Adana Accords of 1998. Erdoğan confirmed this consideration when he stated that "the regime control in Manbij and Ayn al Arab is not something bad."²⁵⁴

The operation was suspended upon the pressures and accords reached with the U.S. on October 17 in Ankara and with Russia on October 22, in Sochi.²⁵⁵ Russia guaranteed the withdrawal of the

²⁵⁴ "Erdoğan: Münbiç'e Rejimin Girmesi Benim İçin Olumsuz Değil," *Aydınlık*, October 15, 2019, <https://www.aydinlik.com.tr/erdogan-munbic-e-rejimin-girmesi-benim-ic-in-olumsuz-degil-turkiye-ekim-2019-2>.

²⁵⁵ President of Russia, "Memorandum of Understanding between Turkey and the Russian Federation," October 22, 2019, <http://en.kremlin.ru/supplement/5452>

PYD/YPG from the 20-mile-deep safe zone and agreed to establish a safe zone, thus recognizing the de facto situation and the established status quo. From the Turkish perspective, the accords and removal of the PYD/YPG elements from the strip only postponed the problem to an indefinite future. However, the elimination of the group could not be succeeded and it still retains its capability though in a distant space. Nevertheless, Turkey managed to eliminate the security risks created by the shelling towards civilians at the border, and to halt the smuggling activities. More importantly, the OPS process, including pre- and post-operation debates, revealed to Ankara the true nature of the problem and the relations behind the scenes. The reactions hinted toward the true nature of the problem which was pointed out in the analysis “Six Years of Work Destroyed in Six Days.”²⁵⁶

The U.S., the ardent supporter of the PYD/YPG, faced the fundamental dilemma of losing a NATO ally. However, in the end, Washington refrained from causing further tension to the relations with the deal. It acknowledged that an autonomous region under its tutelage and control would be hard to manage and establish, and might incur higher costs for the U.S. The U.S. seemed to make a rational choice without losing all its cards during the political process for the future of Syria and downscaled its presence limiting it to the control of oil fields both to gain bargaining leverage with the regime and to sustain its proxy. In this way, it managed to avoid handing over all its investments to the PYD/YPG.

²⁵⁶ Seth J. Frantzman, “Six Years of Work Destroyed in Six Days: The Collapse of Eastern Syria,” *The Jerusalem Post*, October 15, 2019, <https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/six-years-of-work-destroyed-in-six-days-the-collapse-of-eastern-syria-604593>.



FOUR

IMPACTS – TESTING THE EXTREMES



TESTING THE EXTREMES: FROM THE BRINK OF WAR TO THE TEST OF ALLIANCE

This chapter focuses on this research project's original question which was defined as what caused Russia and Turkey to test the extremes of war and alliance. The Syrian crisis, as discussed in Chapter 1, started as an uprising of a population faced with the repressive policies of the regime that refused to offer democratic reforms and neglected the voice of the population it governed. Upon the escalation and eventual mutation, dynamics of territorialization and deterritorialization were introduced to the Syrian War that altered the threat perceptions and strategic calculus of the actors involved. In other words, the power vacuum created its children as non-state actors that are fighting for their diverging and incompatible causes. Beyond their incompetence within the country, their impacts exceeded the borders of the country and inevitably invited regional and global actors to curtail them. However this time, this occurred in line with their diverging outlooks and conflicting interests which neglected the other actors' security concerns. The outcome was the adding of another layer to the already complicated nature of the war. On the one hand, there were non-state actors fighting for their causes and on the other, state actors got involved to ensure their interests or alleviate their security concerns.

Russia and Turkey developed their strategies along with their diverging strategic end-states. Starting from the beginning of the uprising, both Moscow and Ankara preferred to compartmentalize their divergence on the uprising in order not to allow a deterioration of their developing relations. However, as was observed in Turkey's relations

with the U.S., a distrust towards Moscow's policies developed in time. Apparently, it was not a surprise since the nature of Turkish-Russian relations was dominated more by rivalry and conflict in the past five centuries than by cooperation and partnership. That being said, there were critical times that the two countries made significant contributions to each other's security. The growing cooperation between the countries in the aftermath of the Cold War gradually deepened and expanded to cover different domains which were predominantly economic. They preferred to adopt a compartmentalized approach which is based on the cooperation on mutually beneficial domains that correspond to their interests. In strategic domains, they were more distanced since their geopolitical interests are in competition with each other. Nevertheless, both capitals refrained from jeopardizing the growing cooperation in different domains with the potential competition in the geopolitical ones.²⁵⁷

The mutation of the Syrian War, with the corresponding change in its character, started to implicate the strategic calculus of the external actors leading them to diverge and jeopardize their relations. The ways in which Turkey's relations deteriorated with the U.S., its traditional ally, out of growing distrust were discussed in the previous chapter concluding that the proxy relations between the U.S. and the PYD/YPG, and the territorialization of the latter at the expense of creating security threats, generated a strategy change in Ankara and paved way for the military involvement. Turkey's relations with Russia, too, encountered

²⁵⁷ Şener Aktürk, "Relations between Russia and Turkey Before, During, and After the Failed Coup of 2016," *Insight Turkey*, 21, no. 4 (2019): 97-113; Şener Aktürk, "Turkish-Russian Relations after the Cold War (1992-2002)," *Turkish Studies*, 7, no. 3 (2006): 337-364; Ziya Öniş and Şuhnaz Yılmaz, "Turkey and Russia in a Shifting Global Order: Cooperation, Conflict and Asymmetric Interdependence in a Turbulent Region," *Third World Quarterly*, 37, no. 1 (2016): 71-95; Duygu Bazoğlu Sezer, "Turkish-Russian Relations: The Challenges of Reconciling Geopolitical Competition with Economic Partnership," *Turkish Studies*, 1, no. 1 (2000): 59-82; Şener Aktürk, "Toward a Turkish-Russian Axis? Conflicts in Georgia, Syria, and Ukraine, and Cooperation over Nuclear Energy," *Insight Turkey*, 16, no. 4 (2014): 13-22.

a similar trajectory with more outward and visible outcomes that have been conceived here as testing the extremes.

ON THE BRINK OF WAR: TESTING ONE EXTREME

One of the reasons that paved the way to testing one extreme was the different perspectives on the Assad regime mostly emanating from diverging perceptions of the Arab Spring. Moscow, rather than perceiving the uprisings as democracy movements, skeptically accepted them as a Western plot or at least movements that were capitalized by Western nations to further their interests at the expense of Russia's. The direct reflection of that perception in Syria, due to the reasons already discussed in Chapter 1, was to opt for supporting the Assad regime in order to preserve Russia's geopolitical interests in the region. Fundamentally, Russia viewed the developments in the region from the angle of global rivalry which carried regional repercussions that would bring about a rift with Turkey.

On the other hand, Turkey's stance was more in favor of the democratic requests as the situation deteriorated and started to bring about humanitarian and spillover effects. The initial caution left its place to taking initiatives and Turkey started to diverge from its Western allies as the non-state actors started to territorialize. Initially, Ankara's and Moscow's diverging perception of the Arab Spring, the regime's insistence on the crackdown of the protestors, and the hope that the international community will take action to oust Assad led Turkey for the most part to act together with the West, which meant an inevitable divergence between Turkey and Russia.

At the same time, despite the fact that some divergence began to be observed, both capitals preferred to downgrade the impacts of this divergence in order not to allow it to negatively impact already improving relations. Turkey's criticism of the Russian arms delivery and the diplomatically stumbling moves were contained with that rationale. However,

Turkey's request from NATO to deploy Patriot systems near the borders to protect itself from possible chemical and ballistic missile attacks were criticized by Moscow.²⁵⁸ While Russia was trying to contain Turkey's moves in Syria, as the countries had contending views on Assad and on the resolution of the turmoil, they also refrained from allowing the disagreement over Syria to diffuse into other fields, and a pragmatic cooperation prevailed. Putin's visit to Ankara in the aftermath of Turkey's move to force a Russian airplane to land at Esenboğa Airport with a claim of arms smuggling to the regime confirmed this understanding.²⁵⁹ In other words, Russia not only tried to contain Turkey's moves in Syria, but also strived to contain the Syria disagreement so as not to upset the relations.

The containment efforts of Ankara followed a similar pattern with the Russian strategy, mainly through diplomatic means until September 2015, and with military means afterwards. The diplomatic support provided to the regime prolonged and hampered the efforts of Turkey and the West, which were opting for regime change in Syria. Once, the deterritorialization of the regime became evident bringing about the subsequent Russian strategy change that introduced military means, it had inevitable repercussions on the relations between Ankara and Moscow. In other words, the changing character of war and the new de facto realities out of the (de)territorialization on the ground inevitably implicated the relations. The outcome was the growing distrust of Russia in Ankara. Furthermore, as Ankara began to voice a military option, Russia, too, began to introduce hard power assets that fueled threat perceptions on both sides. The shift from diplomatic measures to the utilization of hard power means caused the retreat of Turkey from Syria, which showed itself as a loss of ground, while the grievances with the U.S. and the West were deepening.

²⁵⁸ "Rusya'da Patriot Uyarısı," *Habertürk*, November 22, 2012, <http://www.haberturk.com/dunya/haber/796493-rusyadan-patriot-uyarisi>.

²⁵⁹ "Uçak Olayı İlişkilerimizi Etkilemeyecek," *Sabah*, October 14, 2012, <http://www.sabah.com.tr/gundem/2012/10/14/ucak-olayi-iliskilerimizi-etkilemeyecek>.

The removal of the Patriots that were deployed by the U.S., leaving NATO systems behind, was interpreted in Moscow as a weak support from Washington to Ankara. As the relations between Turkey and the U.S. began to distance, Moscow instead capitalized and started to increase its assertiveness. The growing and visible Russian assertiveness created airspace violations and growing assertiveness in Turkey and ended with a prompt reaction. In other words, the inaction and subsequently growing distrust inadvertently caused the emergence of the incident. In that period, beyond the U.S. and the West, Russia, too, declined and objected to Turkey's proposal to establish a safe zone for refugees and moderate opposition groups arguing that it can only be possible after UNSC approval which would be vetoed by Russia.²⁶⁰

One of the basic impediments surfaced when Russia began to use the PYD/YPG as a leverage against Turkey, upon the introduction of regime change. In a sense, Moscow blamed Ankara for the deterritorialization of the regime, and consequentially sought another layer of containment which was confirmed when Putin declared the Kurds (PYD/YPG) an important actor in Syria during his speech at the UN General Assembly.²⁶¹

A sidelined and contained discontent began to contaminate relations severely when the Russian strategy change began to create its reflections on the ground, which had more direct impacts on Turkey's interests. Ankara reacted negatively to the Russian strategy change. In an interview with Al Jazeera, Erdoğan expressed his disappointment with the Russian intervention and suggested to reconsider the decision and asked why they intervene in this affair without having a border. Particularly, Assad's visit to Moscow²⁶² to thank Russia for

²⁶⁰ "Rusya'da Tampon Bölge Uyarısı," *T24*, October 9, 2014, <http://t24.com.tr/haber/rusyadan-tampon-bolge-uyarisi,273362>.

²⁶¹ "70th Session of the UN General Assembly," *Official Internet Resources of the President of Russia*, September 28, 2015, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50385>.

²⁶² "Assad Shows Up to Thank Putin for the Save," *CBS News*, October 21, 2015, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/syria-bashar-assad-russia-vladimir-putin-war-on-terrorists/>.

the intervention further irritated Ankara, signaling that the option of Assad's removal was weakening. One of the major contentions was the targeting of the moderate opposition that was aligned with Turkey, and the refugee influx caused by the indiscriminate fire on civilians. However, the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergei Lavrov declined warnings and insisted that the campaign targeted "all terrorists" in Syria, not just ISIL, and denied the accusations about civilian casualties.²⁶³

On October 3, 2015, Turkey warned Russia following the airspace violation of an Su-30 fighter. However, the following day another incident occurred upon the radar lock of a MIG-29 on Turkish aircraft patrolling along the borders. This time, Ankara, apart from sending an official warning to Russia, carried the incident to NATO with the hope of deterring Russians from airspace violations²⁶⁴ since Turkish airspace is part of NATO airspace as well. While NATO continued to provide verbal support to Turkey, Russia continued to violate.²⁶⁵ Once the air strikes in early November 2015 began to target Turkmens in the Bayırbucak region, bordering the south of the Hatay province, Ankara became infuriated.²⁶⁶ From Ankara's strategic perspective Turkmens living in the region were accepted as a natural barrier to the PYD/YPG's expansion and efforts to reach the Mediterranean Sea. In other words, the Russian strikes were facilitating the PYD/YPG's efforts for territorialization despite Russians claiming the opposite. Therefore, the Russian move was regarded as a detrimental

²⁶³ "Russia Joins War in Syria: Five Key Points," *BBC News*, October 1, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-34416519>.

²⁶⁴ "Timeline of Russian Incursions into Turkish Airspace," *TRT World*, December 27, 2015, <http://interactive.trtworld.com/highlights-of-2015/ajax/infographics/infographic08.jpg>.

²⁶⁵ Kareem Shaheen, "Nato Condemns Russia over Violations of Turkey's Airspace," *The Guardian*, October 6, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/05/turkey-says-russian-warplane-violated-airspace>.

²⁶⁶ "Davutoğlu'dan Bayırbucak Açıklaması," *NTV*, November 20, 2015, http://www.ntv.com.tr/turkiye/davutoglu-dan-bayirbucak-aciklamasi,GfbCkbGn-UKvjXC_YDjB1w.

blow to Turkey's security interests and interpreted as a strong support to the PYD/YPG's goal of establishing a corridor isolating Turkey from the Middle East.²⁶⁷

In this context, the airspace violations were officially protested by Turkish officials, and the Russian Ambassador to Turkey was invited several times by the Turkish Foreign Minister to convey Ankara's warning messages and discontent to Moscow. Beyond requesting not to repeat such incidents, Ankara warned the Russian side that it would be responsible for a potential undesired incident. President Erdoğan raised the issue of discontent to his counterpart President Putin during their G-20 meeting in Antalya on November 15, 2015. During the meeting Putin characterized the violations as "guests" and Erdoğan replied to him "they were uninvited guests."²⁶⁸ This diverging understanding of the violations rather than alleviating the tensions brought to the surface the depth of the content and how Russia was unwilling to reach a compromise and acknowledge Ankara's concerns. Furthermore, at the aforementioned summit, Putin made a statement blaming Western countries for trading oil with DAESH, primarily implying Turkey.²⁶⁹ The Russian stance towards the airspace violations and the attempts to build pressure on Turkey with the accusation of supporting DAESH through oil trade were the factors that confirmed the deep grievances with Russia and the growing distrust.

As the distrust and changing threat perception began to dominate the context, on November 24, 2015, Turkey downed a Russian Su-24 that had violated Turkish airspace for 17 seconds. The aircraft had been

²⁶⁷ Deniz Zeyrek, "Turkey Warns Russia over Border Security," *Hurriyet Daily News*, November 24, 2015, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-warns-russia-over-border-security-91568>.

²⁶⁸ "Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan: Rusya Ateşle Oynamasın," *NTV*, November 27, 2015, <https://www.ntv.com.tr/turkiye/erdogan-rusya-atesle-oynamasin,NzU50n1sE0CDUyCnMNUweA>.

²⁶⁹ "Putin: ISI Financed from 40 Countries, Including G-20 Members," *Russia Today*, November 16, 2015, <https://www.rt.com/nems/322305-isi-financed-40-countries/>.

negligent to numerous warnings before getting shot down.²⁷⁰ In the aftermath of the event, though NATO supported the Turkish claims and underlined the inviolability of NATO airspace, it also refrained from fueling the tension. It was the first instance that a NATO country was downing a Russian aircraft upon airspace violations. On the other hand, President Obama supported Turkey in this incidence, stating that Turkey “has a right to defend its territory and its airspace” and acknowledging Ankara’s concerns about the Turkmens being targeted, stating that “[Russians] are going after moderate opposition that are supported by not only Turkey but a wide range of countries.”²⁷¹ Obama’s statements were received as a support of Turkey’s position. However, later on, it was criticized that emboldening statements inadvertently caused the occurrence of the incident in the first place.

On the diplomatic front, the Turkish General Staff announced the downing of the aircraft by stressing its “unknown nationality” to downplay the incident, despite more rhetorical statements, stressing “the sovereign right to defend”²⁷² and the statement of Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu that “Turkey took the necessary measures to protect its sovereignty on its territory in line with the rules of engagement.”²⁷³ These statements were the reactions to Moscow’s rhetoric and condemnation that characterized the incident as a “stab in the back,”²⁷⁴ and their insistence that the aircraft had remained within the Syrian airspace. However, President Erdoğan, later on, tried to alleviate the

²⁷⁰ “Turkey Shoots Down Russian Warplane on Syria Border,” *BBC News*, November 24, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-34907983>; “Türkiye Rus Uçağını Böyle Uyardı,” *Milliyet*, November 25, 2015, <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/turkiye-rus-ucagini-boyle-uyardi-gundem-2153078>.

²⁷¹ “Obama Points Finger at Russia over Jet Shoot-Down by Turkey,” *Fox News*, November 24, 2015.

²⁷² “Turkey’s Downing of Russian Warplane – What We Know,” *BBC News*, December 1, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-34912581>.

²⁷³ “Davutoğlu’ndan Rus Uçağı ile İlgili Değerlendirme,” *Milliyet*, 27 November 2015.

²⁷⁴ “Turkey Downing of Russia Jet ‘Stab in the Back’ – Putin,” *BBC News*, November 24, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-34913173>.

situation highlighting the fact that the fighter belonged to Russia was acknowledged only after its downing. Two days after the incident, Erdoğan tried to ease the tension by stating that “if Turkish authorities had known the aircraft was a Russian one, it would not have been shot down.”²⁷⁵ The shift from a rhetorical escalation to a de-escalatory statements was perceived as a step back from Ankara’s initial position.

Moscow introduced a series of sanctions on Ankara, as retaliatory actions, which were announced by Putin when he stated that the incident will have “significant consequences” and “Turkey will regret it more than once.”²⁷⁶ The immediate response was the initiation of a disinformation campaign, claiming that Turkey supports DAESH logistically and economically, and that it allows the passage of DAESH militants through its borders.²⁷⁷ Moscow also requested compensation for the Russian government and asked for an official apology, which were rejected by the Turkish government by stating that what Turkey did was protect its borders. The sanctions included the introduction of economic sanctions that restricted the imports from Turkey, the suspension of tour packages to Turkey, limitations to Turkish organizations operating in Russia, and the reintroduction of a tighter visa regime to Turkish citizens, who were previously eligible to visa-free travel and stay in Russia. In terms of big projects, the suspension of the construction of Turkish Stream gas pipeline and undeclared delays in the construction of Akkuyu Nuclear Plant were part of the retaliation.²⁷⁸ In fact, the wide spectrum of sanctions se-

²⁷⁵ “Erdoğan: Rus Uçağı Olduğunu Bilseydik Farklı Davranırdık,” *BBC Türkçe*, November 26, 2015, http://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler/2015/11/151126_Erdoğan_rusya_suriye.

²⁷⁶ “Putin: Turkey Will Regret Jet Shooting ‘More than Once,’” *Al Jazeera*, December 4, 2015, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/12/putin-turkey-regret-downing-jet-151203071324354.html>.

²⁷⁷ “Russia Presents Proof of Turkey’s Role in ISIS Oil Trade,” *Russia Today*, December 2, 2015, <https://www.rt.com/news/324263-russia-briefing-isis-funding>.

²⁷⁸ “Rusya, Akkuyu Nükleer Santrali İnşaatını Fiilen Durdurdu İddiası,” *Hürriyet*, December 9, 2015, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/rusya-akkuyu-nukleer-santrali- infaatini-fiilen-durdurdu-40024926>.

verely hampered the trade volume and caused significant drops which were already in decline in 2015 at \$24 billion. Trade volume further dropped by \$8 billion in the first six months, and tourists coming from Russia decreased by 87%.²⁷⁹ Economically, the incident caused a loss of \$11 billion for Turkey.²⁸⁰

Apart from the economic implications, the most significant impacts were observed in political and strategic domains. Russia, by allowing the opening of the PYD/YPG office in Moscow in February 2016,²⁸¹ and by supporting the Iraq government who officially requested the withdrawal of Turkish troops from Bashiqa Camp in Mosul,²⁸² took steps that could significantly degrade Turkey's security and elevate its threat perceptions. An opinion poll conducted in January 2016 revealed how the Russian image worsened dramatically and how the country became an imminent threat to Turkey.²⁸³ The poll also demonstrated how the bilateral relations are prone to rapid deterioration, and how fragile the partnership is since there has been less institutionalized interaction between Russia and Turkey compared to Turkey's Western allies. Most importantly, after being militarily engaged in Syria, the US and Russia established a deconfliction mechanism to prevent the occurrence of such incidents, whereas similar mechanisms were not at place with Turkey.

²⁷⁹ "Rus Turist Sayısı Yüzde 87,4 Azaldı," *Habertürk*, July 28, 2016, <http://www.haber-turk.com/ekonomi/tatil/haber/1273217-rus-turist-sayisi-yuzde-87-4-azaldi>.

²⁸⁰ "Rusya ile Krizin Maliyeti en az 11 Milyar Dolar," *NTV*, January 25, 2016, <http://www.ntv.com.tr/ekonomi/rusya-ile-krizin-maliyeti-en-az-11-milyar-dolar,FPbktLfoeEuJ3nHMrOS10A;SelinGirit>, "Turkey Faces Big Losses as Russia Sanctions Bite," *BBC News*, January 2, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-35209987>.

²⁸¹ "Moskova'da PYD ofisi...", *Milliyet*, February 11, 2016, <https://www.milliyet.com.tr/dunya/moskovada-pyd-ofisi-2192651>.

²⁸² Louis Charbonneau, "Russia Asks for U.N. Council Talks on Turkey Action in Syria, Iraq," *Reuters*, December 8, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-turkey-russia/russia-asks-for-u-n-council-talks-on-turkey-action-in-syria-iraq-idUSKBN0TQ2U820151207>.

²⁸³ "Kadir Has Üniversitesi Türkiye Sosyal-Siyasal Eğilimler Araştırması 2015 Sonuçları Açıklandı," *Kadir Has University*, January 13, 2016, <https://khas.edu.tr/tr/haberler/kadir-has-universitesi-turkiye-sosyal-siyasal-egilimler-arastirmasi-2015-sonuclari>.

TOWARDS AN ALLIANCE: TESTING THE OTHER EXTREME

After shooting down a Russian aircraft, having conflicting strategic ends with regards to Assad's future in Syria, and acting in opposite directions, how did Moscow and Ankara manage to reconcile their relations in nine months, rapidly overcoming the detrimental implications of the incident? In other words, how did Russia and Turkey manage to head in opposite directions after testing one extreme, which can be characterized as being on the brink of war? This section is devoted to discussing the factors that brought about the other extreme: the test of alliance.

As discussed throughout the book, the mutation of the conflict through the territorialization of terrorist organizations and deterritorialization of the regime triggered the strategy changes and pushed the external actors to become involved militarily. As the relations with Moscow incurred the lowest level, the process of the territorialization of the PYD/YPG further accelerated by exploiting the unprecedented rift. And Russia, as a means to constrain Turkey's political and military options started to leverage the PYD/YPG card. Even when the Raqqah operation began to be discussed, Lavrov asked the UN envoy to include the PYD/YPG in the Syria Talks,²⁸⁴ which would mean the *actorization* of the already territorialized non-state actor, perceived as a terrorist organization by Ankara. Russian air support and encouragement of the PYD/YPG to cross the west of Euphrates²⁸⁵ were direct blows to Turkey's security and strategy in Syria.

Furthermore, Turkey was also facing a growing threat by the PYD/YPG which announced the Operation Euphrates Wrath for Raqqah.

²⁸⁴ "Lavrov Urges UN Envoy to Include Kurds in Syria Talks," *Al Monitor*, March 11, 2016, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/sites/almonitor/contents/afp/2016/03/syria-conflict-russia-un-diplomacy-kurds.html>.

²⁸⁵ Dorian Jones, "Suspensions about Russian Support of PKK Grow in Turkey," *VOA News*, May 27, 2016, <http://www.voanews.com/a/suspensions-about-russian-support-rebels-grow-turkey/3349122.html>; Fatih Çekirge, "The Secret of the Russian Soldiers in Qamishli," *Hurriyet Daily News*, January 22, 2016.

Beyond the clearing of Raqqah from DAESH, the name of the operation was perceived as a message that indirectly targeted Turkey. The U.S. decision to arm the PYD/YPG with heavy weapons forced Turkey to revise its posture and seek alternative strategies.

In those days, Turkey was suffering several deadly attacks by two terrorist organizations. In other words, as the relations with the U.S. and Russia deteriorated, Turkey even left to the initiative of those terrorist organizations with a potential of creating a strategic vulnerability.²⁸⁶ In this imbroglio, Turkey sought an exit strategy that could revert the process and provide the option to regain the initiative. The scope of this move would have to include to alleviate the terrorist threats posed by both DAESH and the PYD/YPG, and to influence U.S. policy which consequentially would eliminate the tensions with Russia. The deployment of S-400 air defense systems to the Khmeimim Airbase increased the risk of another incident that could not be reversed.²⁸⁷ In that way, Russia not only closed the Syrian airspace to possible Turkish operations but also established an anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) coverage that severely limited the access of Turkish Air Forces to Syrian airspace to conduct antiterrorist operations.

Essentially, the decision to seek reconciliation was a difficult and challenging attempt since Russia recognizes neither the PKK nor its offshoot, the PYD/YPG, as terrorist organizations, whereas the U.S., at least recognizes the PKK as a terrorist organization - but not the PYD/YPG. Since the major aim of the strategy change was to expand the options against the PYD/YPG, the most challenging question was the issue of the negotiation ground for Turkey and Russia. The answer to the incongruity lied on the initial positions of the parties, which acted

²⁸⁶ Dilek, "2016 Sonu İtibariyle Türkiye'nin İflas Eden Ortadoğu Politikası", 54.

²⁸⁷ Jonathan Marcus, "Russia S-400 Syria Missile Deployment Sends Robust Signal," *BBC News*, December 1, 2015, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-34976537>.

primarily on the principal of territorial integrity.²⁸⁸ It constituted the foundational basis that subsumed other differences in Syria, such as the territorialization of threats which changed the calculus of the actors and the deterritorialization of the regime that pulled Russia into Syria. As the PYD/YPG expanded to a degree that might threaten the territorial integrity of Syria, it became contradictory to the Russian end-state as well.²⁸⁹ This was a major shift in the Russian approach since a non-state actor that was not controlled by Moscow was probably seen as a risky option to be sustained – while the U.S. continued to have a grip on it. What is more, any competition to control it might only serve the interests of the PYD/YPG to expand its agency since the latter would have provided a room to play the two against each other for its own stakes. Bluntly, the concerns over territorial integrity triggered the process of reconciliation, which still depended on some steps from Ankara.

The initial step came with President Erdoğan's and Prime Minister Yıldırım's letters to their counterparts for the Russian National Day on June 12, 2016, which stressed the willingness to restore relations. On June 24, 2016, another letter was sent that expressed the regret and condolences to the pilot's family. Kazakhstan president also played a constructive role in this process to overcome the crisis.²⁹⁰ The 45-minute-long telephone conversation between Erdoğan and Putin on June 28, following the terrorist attack at Istanbul Atatürk Airport that caused 45 lives and 230 injuries, was the first contact between the two after the incident. Finally, Foreign Ministers Lavrov and Çavuşoğlu met in Sochi, which represented the first face-to-face contact between the two countries.

But the most important step that would open the way for reconciliation came in the aftermath of the July 15 coup attempt, when

²⁸⁸ Emre Erşen, "Evaluating the Fighter Jet Crisis in Turkish-Russian Relations," *Insight Turkey*, 19, no.4 (2017): 96.

²⁸⁹ Abdülkadir Selvi, "Cerablus Operasyonun Kodları," *Hürriyet*, August 22, 2016.

²⁹⁰ Murat Yetkin, "Türk-Rus Krizini Bitiren Gizli Diplomasinin Öyküsü," *Hürriyet*, August 8, 2016.

Putin openly condemned the attempt and expressed his unconditional support to the democratically elected government, while the Western countries showed hesitance. Instead of the weak messages pointing out the preservation of democracy, the strong support delivered from Moscow to the democratically elected government was very well received in Ankara. Receiving strong support from Moscow²⁹¹ when the U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry warned Turkey about the mass purges of plotters, and while the leader of that group that orchestrated the coup attempt still resided in Pennsylvania with a Permanent Residency Card (Green Card)²⁹² was the catalyst on the course of repairing relations.²⁹³

Following this event, Putin and Erdoğan met in St. Petersburg on August 9, 2016, which was Erdoğan's first visit abroad, and Erdoğan expressed his thoughts on Putin's call right after the coup attempt with the words that it "meant a lot psychologically," and signaled the relations and friendship between the countries would be restored very soon.²⁹⁴ During the meeting, most significantly, the cooperation in the defense field came to the fore, hinting not only toward the will to deepen the bilateral relations but also to the upcoming crisis with the U.S. However, the content of this defense cooperation was not unveiled by the leaders.²⁹⁵ Putin's visit on October 10, 2016, augmented the process of normalization and removed the strains in the relations. During the visit, beyond agreeing on the construction of the Turk-

²⁹¹ "Turkey Thanks Putin for Unconditional Support over Coup Attempt," *Hürriyet Daily News*, July 25, 2016, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-thanks-putin-for-unconditional-support-over-coup-attempt---102062>.

²⁹² Ilya Lakstygol, "The Foreign Policy Dimensions of Turkey's Coup", *Russia Direct*, July 19, 2016, <http://www.russia-direct.org/analysis/foreign-policy-dimensions-turkeys-failed-coup>.

²⁹³ Erşen, "Evaluating the Fighter Jet Crisis", 95.

²⁹⁴ "Putin Mends Broken Relations with Turkey's Erdoğan," *BBC News*, August 9, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-37018562>; "Dunya, Erdoğan Putin görüşmesini böyle gordu," *Hürriyet*, August 10, 2016; Michael Sahlin, "Erdoğan'ın Putin Ziyareti Batı'nın Sınırlarını Bozuyor," *BBC News*, August 9, 2016.

²⁹⁵ "Turkey in Talks to Purchase Russia's Newest Missile System," *The Moscow Times*, 21 November 2016, <https://themoscowtimes.com/news/turkey-in-negotiations-to-purchase-russias-newest-missile-system-56225>

ish Stream gas pipeline, Putin reiterated Moscow's commitment to the construction of the Akkuyu nuclear power plant. The most notable step came from Ankara with the announcement of its interest to purchase S-400 air defense systems which would create new tensions with the U.S. and NATO.²⁹⁶

What prompted Turkey to seek ways to restore the relations and even to find grounds to deepen them? It can be suggested that as the principal of territorial integrity in Syria was the foundation for reconciliation, the nature of threat perception determined the pace in Turkey. Ankara always perceived the fate of the Syrian regime from a humanitarian and security perspective, and the territorialization of the PYD/YPG and DAESH as serious security threats. However, the strained relations with the U.S. and weak support from the West in the aftermath of the coup attempt, as if they were waiting for the outcome and tacitly approving the coup attempt, were perceived as serious threats to security. Furthermore, the coup attempt was also interconnected with the PYD/YPG/PKK as they tried to replicate the 'Rojava' model in Turkey during 2015.

The test of the other extreme initiated in this context moved the normalization to another level, namely the alignment of the Syrian policy. The primary outward outcome of the normalization was seen in Turkey's strategy change with the initiation of Operation Euphrates Shield in August 2016, when Turkey became militarily involved in Syria to eliminate DAESH from the Azaz-Jerablus strip. The reconciliation produced direct impacts on Turkey's strategic posture and the eventual actualization of the strategy change. Before the reconciliation with Moscow, Turkey had lost its ability to use its airpower in Syria, had to postpone a possible operation against the territorialization of the terrorist organizations, and its reach and response options

²⁹⁶ "Turkey's Interest in Russian Missile System May Spark New Tension with NATO," *Daily Sabah*, August 16, 2016, <http://www.dailysabah.com/politics/2016/08/17/turkeys-interest-in-russian-missile-system-may-spark-new-tension-with-nato>.

were limited to the range of Firtina howitzers.²⁹⁷ More assertive options were embedded with higher risks that could deteriorate already fragile relations with both Russia and the U.S. However, with the normalization, Turkey immediately initiated Operation Euphrates Shield that pushed DAESH from its borders, thus eliminating one of the threats and curbing the other by preventing the actualization of the PYD/YPG corridor, which was seen as a “terror corridor” stretching along the Syrian borders. The Russian reaction to the operation was critical, but the tone was calm. After expressing his discontent on the launch of operation without informing the regime, Putin nonetheless admitted that it was “not something unexpected” for Moscow.²⁹⁸ This operation and growing cooperation in Syria were not perceived as positive steps, and it was reported as Turkey and Russia dividing Syria into spheres of influences.²⁹⁹

However, one of the most significant steps was to come with the Moscow Declaration. On December 20, 2016, the foreign ministers of Russia, Turkey, and Iran agreed on cooperating to reach a comprehensive ceasefire with an aim of reaching a peace agreement on the basis of the territorial integrity of Syria. The meeting took place in the aftermath of the Syrian regime victory in Aleppo, while Turkey cooperated and convinced the regime to open a humanitarian corridor. Reaching a deal to evacuate civilians to prevent a humanitarian disaster from Aleppo facilitated the reconciliation as well.³⁰⁰ Lavrov praised the cooperation process with Ankara for being effective compared to the “fruitless

²⁹⁷ Abdülkadir Selvi, “Cerablus Operasyonunun Kodları,” *Hürriyet*, August 22, 2016.

²⁹⁸ “Turkey’s Syria Operation ‘Not Unexpected,’ Russian President Putin Says,” *Daily Sabah*, September 6, 2016, <http://www.dailysabah.com/diplomacy/2016/09/06/turkeys-syria-operation-not-unexpected-russian-president-putin-says>.

²⁹⁹ David Barchard, “How Putin and Erdoğan Divided Up Syria,” *Middle East Eye*, October 24, 2016, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/columns/turkey-russia-syria-putin-erdogan-us-frenemies-1670199042>.

³⁰⁰ Leonid Bershidsky, “Russia and Turkey Pushed the West out of Syria: Western Nations Have Become Irrelevant to Syria’s Future,” *Bloomberg*, December 14, 2016, <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2016-12-14/russia-and-turkey-pushed-the-west-out-of-syria>.

talking shop” with Washington.³⁰¹ One of the basic tests in those days came when Russian Ambassador to Turkey Andrey Karlov was assassinated in Ankara in December 2016 by a police officer with links to the Fethullah Gülen Terrorist Organization, the perpetrator of the July 2016 coup attempt, were revealed during his trial process. The assassination of a Russian ambassador had the potential to revert the entire reconciliation process between Turkey and Russia, triggering another wave of oscillation. Nevertheless, thanks to Moscow’s awareness on the issue, instead of cooling off the relations it actually improved them.

The reconciliation process materialized in Syria with the Astana Summit in January 2017,³⁰² where Russia, Turkey, and Iran reiterated their commitment to a political solution. Both Ankara and Moscow were primarily concerned about the territorial integrity of the country, but they retained their divergence on the future of the regime and negotiated with diverging objectives. They referenced the UN Resolution 2254 as a legal basis for the new efforts, to prevent misconceptions of the process, and to revitalize the stalled progress towards a political resolution. However, neither the U.S. nor the PYD/YPG was invited to attend, while DAESH- and al-Nusra-held territories were excluded from the process. The deepening alignment through the Astana process brought about an implicit marginalization of the U.S. from the political resolution, which led the West to perceive the Astana as an alternative to the Geneva process, irrespective of the announcements of the guarantor states that the process is part of the Geneva and UN-led framework and process, and is designed to resolve the technical issues with the aim of reducing the violence.³⁰³ However, in terms of impli-

³⁰¹ “Russia-Turkish Talks on Aleppo More Effective Than ‘Fruitless’ US Talks, Says Lavrov”, *Euronews*, December 14, 2016, <https://www.euronews.com/2016/12/14/russia-turkish-talks-on-aleppo-more-effective-than-pointless-us-talks-says>

³⁰² “Joint Statement by Iran, Russia, Turkey on the International Meeting on Syria,” January 23-24 2017.

³⁰³ “UN Envoy to Syria Stresses Importance of Astana, Geneva Peace Talks”, *TASS*, <http://tass.com/world/965763>.

cations, Turkey implicitly managed to convince the other guarantors to accept the PYD/YPG as a terrorist organization that poses a threat to the territorial integrity of Syria as it was evaluated under the same category of radical groups such as DAESH and al-Nusra.

On the other hand, substantial progress in the process was only achieved when Turkey failed to convince the U.S. to withdraw support to the PYD/YPG during Erdoğan's Washington visit in May 2017. Erdoğan tried to convince the Trump administration to change its Syria policy, halt using the PYD/YPG as a proxy, and stop the delivery of heavy weapons. In fact, the visit was the first after the coup attempt and focused on a "positive agenda" to overcome the distrust between the allies. However, as Turkey could not manage to convince the administration on a policy change, Turkey speeded up its commitment to the already signed de-escalation zones agreement that came at the fourth round of the Astana talks on May 4, 2017. Russia, Turkey, and Iran agreed on the establishment of de-escalation zones (DEZ) in four regions of Syria, which were the Idlib province, parts of Hama and Homs, Eastern Ghouta in the northern Damascus, and the Deraa and Quneitra provinces bordering Jordan. Those regions were being held by the opposition groups including the AQ-linked radical groups. In fact, the DEZ deal excluded the terrorist organizations from ceasefires but focused on the unhindered humanitarian assistance to the people enclaved in these regions.

In a way, with the process Turkey tried to increase its bargaining chip in Washington, and if possible, to bring Washington to the table, which would curtail both the territorialization of terrorist organizations and eliminate the regime. It can also be perceived as an attempt to reconcile the external actors and eliminate the divergence on end-states on the way to finding a political solution to the Syrian conflict. Conversely, as the reconciliation efforts waned with the U.S., the Astana process and the alignment with Russia turned out to be a balancing act. Nevertheless, this would not be as easy as it was envisioned since the

tensions and distrust between Moscow and Ankara were deeper and longer than assumed.

The Astana agreement and the declaration of nationwide ceasefire aimed at the transition to a political process. But, the Assad regime with the Russian air support utilized the DEZs to eliminate the opposition and to restore the regime control through a phased strategy, while expelling the civilian population to the Idlib province instead of fighting on different fronts at the same time which was derailing its resources and exceeding its war-fighting capacity. In other words, the Astana process, in line with the core intent of the process, facilitated the restoration of the regime's control in the opposition-held enclaves, thus rebuilding the territorial integrity of the country.

Even though the de-escalation process brought some signs of convergence in the Syrian policy, the expulsion of the opposition groups towards Idlib transformed the city into a container, where all unresolved problems were aggregated. It also became a densely populated city, full of displaced people. The process resembled sweeping the dust under the carpet. The changing nature of Idlib through this phased strategy not only turned it into a receptacle of 4 million refugees, but it also evolved into a place which contains pretexts for operations for the sake of counterterrorism, given the radical groups were blended into the civilian population. In other words, the alignment through the Astana and Sochi processes created potential future friction points between the states that had initiated the processes.

On September 4, 2018, Assad, capitalizing on the changing nature of Idlib and with the pretext of the existence of radical groups, launched an operation with the support of Russia and Iran to capture the city and expel the population further to the borders of Turkey. The indiscriminate fires and inability to distinguish terrorists and civilians led to severe humanitarian implications, creating the risk of another refugee influx into Turkey. While with Astana process Turkey granted Assad the chance to re-establish his control on the opposition pockets

which are close to Damascus, Assad with his phased strategy created a potential friction point and continued to create grounds to export his internal problems to Turkey as part of his transnationalization strategy. In other words, while Turkey implicitly renounced its regime change claims, Assad continued with his original strategy.

Upon these developments, a more substantial alignment between Moscow and Ankara came with the Sochi Agreement, on September 17, 2018, when Russia, Turkey, and Iran agreed to announce Idlib province as a demilitarized zone effective on October 15, 2018.³⁰⁴ The Sochi Agreement, elevated the likelihood of a regime operation in Idlib with the consent of Moscow, while Ankara managed to convince Moscow of its security concerns, mainly emanating from the potential refugees and the risk of radical groups that might travel by blending into the civilian population. On the other hand, in exchange for these gains, Ankara consented to keep the M4/M5 highways open and to take measures to disarm the radical groups; both of which are difficult to realize given the complex nature of the problem. Nevertheless, Ankara managed to extend its observation posts in Idlib to monitor the activities of both the radical and the regime activities. The observation posts were instrumentalized to keep Idlib relatively stable and to allow the deradicalization of the groups which are relatively moderate. However, the resolution of the issue of AQ-linked radicals such as Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), also referred to as Tahrir al-Sham, an active extremist group involved in the Syrian Civil War, is still pending.

The alignment of Russian and Turkey through the Astana and Sochi processes created a common ground for reconciliation and the har-

³⁰⁴ Joyce Karam, "Full Text of Turkey-Russia Memorandum on Idlib Revealed," *The National*, September 19, 2018, <https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/full-text-of-turkey-russia-memorandum-on-idlib-revealed-1.771953>; "Syria War: Russia and Turkey to Create Buffer Zone in Idlib," *BBC News*, September 17, 2018, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-45554188>; "Turkey, Russia Agree on Borders of Idlib Disarmament Zone," *Hurriyet Daily News*, September 21, 2018, <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-russia-agree-on-borders-of-idlib-disarmament-zone-ministry-137087>

monization of interests,³⁰⁵ at least at the discursive level. Yet, when one looks closer, the divergence and utilization of the processes for their own conflicting interests continued to condition the success of the intended consequences. Each of the parties has acknowledged the process from its agential perspective, therefore setting the ground for future friction and tensions, while leaving the gradually decreasing chance for reconciliation and political resolution in place. Nevertheless, the Astana process continued to play a substantial role in aligning the interests of the parties on the ground of the territorial integrity of Syria.

Turkey, through engaging in a reconciliation process has granted the regime an invaluable chance to focus to the regions that pose grave threats to its survival. Assad, by transforming the de-escalation zones into fighting zones, through a phased strategy that allows the concentration of his forces, betrayed the humanitarian intent of the agreements, and instead based on an interest-oriented understanding, utilized them to reterritorialize his regime. However, Assad while reterritorializing the regime pushed the problems to as distant from the capital as possible, thus creating the grounds both for transnationalizing the problem and pretexts to intervene militarily to re-establish its control on the opposition groups. In fact, the Syrian regime prefers a military solution over a political one, or at least to start the negotiations with an upper hand by creating de facto situations, and re-establishing the control on NSA-held territories. Apparently, Damascus's strategy is founded upon a presumption of the continued support from Iran and Russia. Any disruption of the support might reduce its bargaining chip. And, an early engagement in the negotiations might hinder its gains, which might end with the loss of control that is already fragile, given the fact that its resources and governing capabilities have been severely reduced and damaged.

³⁰⁵ Emel Parlar Dal, "Turkey after Astana, Syria and Global Interplay", *Anadolu Ajansı*, January 26, 2017, <http://aa.com.tr/en/analysis-news/turkey-after-astana-syria-and-global-interplay/735532>.

Russia, on the other hand, capitalized from the distrust between Turkey and the United States, found an opportunity to promote itself as an international peace broker,³⁰⁶ though implicitly it favored the survival of the regime. However, the prevailing pragmatism and the strategic end of keeping Syria united allowed Moscow to build relations with the regional actors that share similar goals. By establishing and initiating alternative negotiations formats, Moscow sought to shape the peace process, and reconcile the interests of the regional actors on the basis of Syrian territorial integrity. It is also obvious that these efforts are in line with Russian interests that allow Moscow to sustain its relevance and role in the future of Syria. The Astana process provided a format that ensures its interest would be guaranteed, rather than ineffective and time-consuming negotiations that would prolong the process and derail the limited resources.³⁰⁷

Ankara, concerned primarily with the territorial integrity of Syria, due to the uneven expansion of the PYD/YPG along its southern borders, welcomed the Russian efforts. The alignment has facilitated its efforts in Syria that aimed to alleviate its grave security concerns. In other words, territorial integrity and the will to revert the territorialization of non-state actors not only created a common ground for compromising diverging end-states, but also manifested in taking the initiative of shaping the evolution of the crisis and the post-conflict political process.

However, the alignment with Moscow was not that easy as was envisaged or perceived by the West. On the contrary, the building of trust is still fragile and is susceptible to heightened tensions and

³⁰⁶ Patrick Wintour, "Russia in Power Broking Role as Syria Peace Talks Begin in Astana," *The Guardian*, January 23, 2017.

³⁰⁷ N. Mozes and M. Terdiman, "Russian Efforts to Exclude U.S., Europe from Political Solution in Syria and Create a Framework for Bypassing Geneva I," *The Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI), Inquiry & Analysis Series No: 1292*, December 23, 2016, <https://www.memri.org/reports/russian-efforts-exclude-us-europe-political-solution-syria-and-create-framework-bypassing>.

frictions. The first instance was already seen when Russia caused the death of Turkish soldiers during the Operation Euphrates Shield when Russian aircraft targeted a building in al-Bab. Putin, right after the incident called Erdoğan to express his condolences and regret, while he implicitly blamed Turkey for not sharing the locations of the units.³⁰⁸ The Russian claims were renounced by the Turkish side.³⁰⁹ Nevertheless, the open support of the PYD/YPG by the U.S. and higher security concerns prevented the relations from becoming strained due to this incident, which remained short of a major diplomatic realignment.

In terms of the implications of the U.S. support to the PYD/YPG, though the process could not manage to curb the extent of the delivered support, Turkey achieved to constrain the PYD/YPG ability to transform this support into new de facto realities on the ground that could be detrimental to the Turkish security interests. And most notably, with the Turkish and Russian alignment “the unilateral ability of the US to project power in the region has diminished” to a great extent.³¹⁰ This alignment was perceived as an outcome of the growing distrust between the U.S. and Turkey as argued by Henri Barkey who stated, “Ankara’s rapprochement with Russia has occurred amid increasing tensions with the United States...[and] Erdoğan’s anger at the Obama administration.”³¹¹ However, Trump’s election couldn’t wield the expected normalization and a change in Washington’s Syrian policy, and therefore create a common ground to rebuild the trust with

³⁰⁸ “Kremlin Explains Why Russia’s Airstrike Resulted in Turkish Soldiers’ Death,” *Sputnik*, February 10, 2017, <https://sputniknews.com/middleeast/201702101050536710-kremlin-russia-syria-turkish-soldiers/>

³⁰⁹ “TSK 3 Şehit ‘Kazası’nın Ses Kaydını Verdi...’Uyarı’ Moskova’da,” *Karar*, February 17, 2017.

³¹⁰ Lina Khatib, 6.

³¹¹ Henri Barkey, “Putin and Erdoğan’s Marriage of Convenience,” *Foreign Policy*, January 11, 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/01/11/putin-and-erdogans-marriage-of-convenience/>.

the U.S. due to the influence of the “Establishment” on Trump.³¹² In fact, after the May 2017 Erdoğan-Trump meeting, Turkey accelerated the commitment with Russia and adopted a policy of balancing against Washington, which facilitated the materialization of the strategy change and hence the military presence in Syria.³¹³

Though it is perceived that Moscow is trying to peel off Turkey from NATO, Turkey too approached the alignment with Moscow with doubt. The U.S. policy change on the fate of Assad, in other words renouncing the policy of regime change in exchange for increasing the military footprint on the PYD/YPG-held territories, is believed to have come about after a deal between the U.S. and Russia. Particularly, the development of *modus operandi* along the Euphrates River kept those suspicions alive in Ankara.³¹⁴ The most notable developments took place during the Operation Peace Spring, when the regime took over the PYD/YPG-held territories without fighting under the auspices of the U.S. and Russia. It can be suggested that the U.S. and Russia continued a certain level of coordination to limit the success of Turkey’s operations along the borders, confirming the doubts of Ankara. At least, both have a common interest to keep the PYD/YPG at their disposal, though with different objectives.

One of the most significant outcomes of this alignment process came when Turkey decided to buy S-400 air defense systems from Russia. The Russian decision to sell the modern S-400 air defense systems to its traditional rival was seen as a positive step in Ankara that might alleviate the distrust between the countries, as the relations broad-

³¹² Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, 242-243; Elliott Abrams, “Trump the Traditionlaist,” *Foreign Affairs*, 96:4, July/August 2017, 10-16.

³¹³ Muharrem Ekşi, “The Syrian Crisis as a Proxy War and the Return of the Realist Great Power Politics,” *ANKASAM Uluslararası Kriz ve Siyaset Arastirmalari Dergisi*, Hybrid Warfare Special Issue, 1(2), 2017, 106-129, p.117.

³¹⁴ “The US Is Building a Military Airfield in Northern Syria as Part of Its Ongoing Campaign against Daesh, a Representative of the Syrian Democratic Forces Command Told Sputnik on Condition of Anonymity,” *Sputnik News*, October 4, 2016, <https://sputniknews.com/middleeast/201610041045991523-syria-us-airbase/>.

ened and deepened to include defense industry cooperation. On other hand, it is evident that selling a Russian system to a NATO country was a prompt action that would trigger heated debates within NATO, and a clear message to the alliance, from the Russian perspective. In fact, Moscow managed to incite one of the hottest debates within the NATO alliance between its two important and powerful allies. There is no doubt that one of Moscow's goals was to weaken the alliance, which continues to hold its essential anti-Russian character, irrespective of the fact that the Cold War has ended.

What prompted Turkey to buy Russian air defense systems? The first answer is its ongoing needs to procure air defense systems and the U.S. unwillingness to provide Patriots in the last decade. While the U.S. was quite reluctant to share critical defense capabilities, Russia was eager and immediately responded with providing a comparatively sophisticated one. The second reason that prompted Ankara to take such a decisive action was created by the grievance and distrust created with the PYD/YPG and most notably with Washington's weak posture regarding the July 15 coup attempt and the refusal to extradite the leader of the coup attempt, Fethullah Gülen, who still resides in the United States.

The purchase of the systems first appeared in the Turkish media on June 9, 2017, and the deal that is worth \$2.5 billion was signed in December 2017.³¹⁵ The deal was comparatively beneficial to Turkey as it foresaw the partial technology transfer and joint production, though the extent has not been clarified yet. Whether Russia would honor the delivery was another question since the delivery of the system was perceived as a trust test between Moscow and Ankara. The delivery of the system starting on July 12, 2019 to Ankara meant that Moscow passed the test, which signified the expansion of economic relations into the

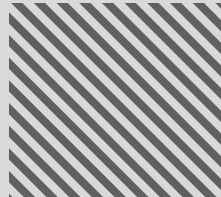
³¹⁵ "Turkey, Russia Sign Deal on Supply of Russian S-400 Missiles," *Reuters*, December 29, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-turkey-missiles/turkey-russia-sign-deal-on-supply-of-s-400-missiles-idUSKBN1EN0T5>.

military strategic domain. But, it created a deep tension between the U.S. and Turkey, with Washington claiming that the S-400 would harm the relations and would allow Russia to steal the secrets of F-35 fighters. The outcome was the removal of Turkey from the JSF program, of which Ankara was a production partner rather than a mere costumer. The signs of deepening defense cooperation came after Washington's decision to stop the delivery of the already paid aircrafts. Erdoğan's reaction was to attend the Moscow Air Show MAKS 19, where Putin personally showed the Su-57 to Erdoğan on August 27, 2019, on the same day, the second batch of S-400 arrived in Ankara. During the visit, the two leaders were in a warm mood, and Erdoğan asked, "Are we buying this?" reminding the U.S. that Turkey is not without alternatives in terms of procurement. While no substantial moves followed the purchase of the Su-57s, Turkey sped up its National Combat Aircraft (MMU) TF-X project, aware of the fact that any procurement of such weapon systems creates long-lasting dependencies.



FIVE

PROSPECTS – FROM
CHANGING CHARACTER
OF WAR TO CHANGING
CHARACTER OF RELATIONS



SETTING THE GROUND FOR PROSPECTS

This chapter focuses on the question of whether the changing character of war causes a change in the character of relations. In other words, how have the actors' strategic calculi and their subsequent actions been affected by the character of war? What makes and/or drives them to keep cooperating or diverging? How far are those diverging and converging trends, which condition their cooperation and distancing, sustainable? These questions set the ground for the prospects of the changing relations within the Ankara-Washington and Ankara-Moscow axes. These questions are relevant since unprecedented events and developments were observed in relations, which have raised more questions than they removed. In history, similar unexpected alignments were recorded in the case of the Russia-Germany Pact during the Second World War, and Russia is still developing pragmatic partnerships with China and Iran. The questions have the potential to shed light on the future of relations between the states, the alliances they forge, and the variables that determine their strategic calculi, which means a number of broader perspectives can be obtained through the discussion. For the Syrian context and its implications on Turkey, Russia, and the U.S., does pragmatism or more substantial connections drive the nature of relations despite the growing distrust track record? We observed the existence of a traditional NATO ally who considered sanctioning Ankara with the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA), and, on the other hand, a traditional geopolitical rival, who delivered S-400 air defense systems and who cooperated to distance

the direct threat of the PYD/YPG from the border of its rival. How can this contradiction be explained?

In light of the discussion being held so far, the (de)territorialization trends on the ground and the introduction of non-state actors as proxies by the external actors, who hesitated or refrained from direct intervention, can be seen as the factors that provide the most straightforward answer to that questions. However, each of the actors, who perceived a direct threat out of the (de)territorialization changed their strategic calculus that led them to intervene indirectly through proxies. Obtaining proxies and striving to achieve strategic goals through them, consequentially, granted more agential autonomy to proxies and allowed them to pursue their own agendas while restraining the options of perpetrators aiming to resolve the existing - or created - contradictions between themselves. In other words, the role granted to the proxies transformed and manifested itself as an agency that started to restrain the options and narrow the room for actions.

Conversely, due to the complex, interconnected, interwoven, and multilayered nature of the conflict, probably the most straightforward conclusion that can be drawn so far is that the *war continues*. The meaning of the proposition is the fact that it will continue to produce outcomes implicating not only the evolution of the war but also the nature of relations between the actors, the fate of proxies, and their relations and position with the regime. In fact, all are susceptible to bringing about unprecedented developments. Nevertheless, some trajectories can be identified upon which prospective analyses can be developed.

THE CHANGING CHARACTER OF WAR

What are the characteristics that make the Syrian War distinct and unique? How have those characteristics transformed the character of the war and created implications on state behaviors? These questions widen the angle of discussions that have taken place so far. The character of war, the ambiguity of the behaviors of the actors, and the uncer-

tainty surrounding them have complicated the situation so as to create an environment conducive to the growth and expansion of non-state actors. They, in time, were either employed as proxies, or were feared and categorized as threats that should be eliminated. Within this framework, firstly, the concept of ambiguity/uncertainty embedded into the conflict will be discussed, which is deemed to offer insight into the root causes of the mutation of the conflict, causing the emergence of the territorialization/deterritorialization process. And consequentially, how the proxy war that emerged out of this process altered the strategic calculi of state actors will be explored.

AMBIGUITY/UNCERTAINTY

Ambiguity/uncertainty can be defined as a situation in which actors have a partial understanding of their surrounding circumstances that either enable or constrain them to reach a clear and comprehensive portrayal of the situation and to develop effective and robust solutions to defy the negative impacts of the faced situation. Ambiguity/uncertainty essentially challenges the actors' interests and poses risks that are prone to produce degrading impacts on them. It can be conceived as a lack of awareness of the surrounding situation which calls for action by the actors. In other words, due to the lack of awareness and limited understanding, the actors eventually lose the capability to identify the challenges they face and the remedies to resolve them.

In the Syrian case, as the uprising started to speed up in March 2011, the Assad regime resisted following suggestions to make reforms with the fear of being plotted against, and instead insisted on following its own strategy to suppress the uprising with an escalated crackdown strategy. While the escalated crackdown strategy further distanced the regime from the international community, the international community, on the other hand, started to lose channels of influence on the regime, while delivering mixed and supporting messages to the protestors. These contradictory and mutually feeding processes were caused

from the uncertainty on the ground and resulted in further deepening the uncertainty due to the delayed responses to constrain its effects. The then U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton summarized the situation in her book *Hard Choices* with the words that the problem in Syria was “too complicated and intricate” hampering the “scattered multilateral attempts” leading the administration to refer it as a “wicked one” which led to the conclusion of options as “Do nothing, and a humanitarian disaster envelops the region. Intervene militarily, and risk opening Pandora’s Box and wading into another quagmire like Iraq. Send aid to the rebels and watch it end up in the hands of extremists. Continue with diplomacy, and run head-first into a Russian veto.”³¹⁶ These words prove how the uncertainty on the ground created ambiguity in actors, and therefore, how it reverberated on the ground as the mutation of the conflict.

How the dilemma of promptness and hesitance mutated the character of the conflict with its consequential practical outcomes was already discussed in preceding chapters. To reiterate here, out of the fears of failure stemming from limited understanding, primarily due to lack of proper intelligence about the social and institutional dynamics that have potential to produce negative impacts, the international community hesitated to become involved in the crisis and take alleviating actions for the uprising. In other words, the embedded ambiguity about Syria and the evolving situation on the ground brought about hesitance. The hesitance, which in turn strengthened the process of uncertainty of the situation and the ambiguity of the actors’ behaviors, caused further deepening of the crisis. In other words, the uncertainty on the ground and the ambiguity of the actors produced miscalculations that spirally fostered each other, thus unleashing the unintended consequences and causal forces that brought about the radicalization and territorialization out of the mobilized groups. In other words, the

³¹⁶ Hillary Rodham Clinton, *Hard Choices* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014), 389.

mutually constructing process of inertia and uncertainty caused the unprecedented emergence of DAESH.

The rise and the eventual territorialization of DAESH transformed the nature of the conflict and made the spillover hardly manageable.³¹⁷ With DAESH's and the PYD/YPG's territorialization, the spillover of both initiated the process of changes in the strategy calculus of the actors as an outcome of the process of the diffusion of uncertainty since the threat perceptions that drive strategic calculus were clarified. Russia, on the other hand, from the very beginning strived to constrain the process of the regime's deterritorialization.

From a broader perspective, the fractured nature of the opposition increased the temptations of the groups to territorialize, as long as their capability allowed them to create a basis for mobilization and to reach empowering resources that could add the resilience of diverse non-state actors. As the resilience and mobilization managed to pass a threshold, their reliance on external support decreased or, at least as they presumed so, they started to portray some sort of autonomy in their behavior. Furthermore, the miscalculated decisions out of unawareness of the situation strengthened the already deteriorating process. For example, the lift of the oil embargo by the EU on the purchase of oil from Syria in April 2013, opened the channels of financing, and therefore inadvertently strengthened their warfighting capacity as DAESH started to sell 30,000 barrels per day, and the PYD/YPG 40,000 barrels per day. On the other hand, these non-state actors, while alleviating the uncertainty as they began to display the extent of the threat they can pose, started to be perceived as the ones that should be curtailed, utilized, or eliminated. These different attitudes towards them, by state actors, not only delineated the already diverging end-states but also

³¹⁷ Emel Parlar Dal, "Impact of the Transnationalization of the Syrian Civil War on Turkey: Conflict Spillover Cases of ISIS and PYD-YPG/PKK," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 29, no.4 (2016), 1400.

further elevated the level of the state actors' engagement. This process explains how the embedded uncertainty increased and diffused in time.

The initial posture of external actors towards the crisis and their diverging commitments, driven by their interests and threat perceptions, also contributed to the process of ambiguity. It has already been discussed how the U.S. posture, summarized as inaction and hesitation, contributed to the mutation of the conflict. Initially, the U.S. promoted the removal of Assad with statements such as "eventually Syria will fall, the Assad regime will fall, and we have to have somebody who we're working with that we can help pick up the pieces and stitch back together a cohesive, coherent country."³¹⁸ However, the evolution of the crisis showed how such statements contributed to the ambiguity, particularly about the true nature of American intentions in Syria, despite the hopes for prompt action. In the cycle of actor ambiguity and situational uncertainty, eventually, the distrust started to grow against the U.S. as they intensified the support to the PKK offshoot, the PYD/YPG.

The process actually shows how the uncertainty contributed to ambiguity, if not naivety, on the U.S. side, ignoring or failing to grasp the implications of their inaction on the Syrian opposition. In fact, the lessons learned from Afghanistan, namely not to create an Al-Qaida-like organization, and from Iraq led the U.S. to adopt inaction. However, the distinct and unique characteristics of the Syrian case produced utterly opposite outcomes. In other words, whereas the miscalculated intervention created the expansion of Al-Qaida, the miscalculated non-intervention created DAESH. The fear of "weapons could end up in wrong hands" as an unintended consequence created wrong groups as the radicalization started to gain pace. Furthermore, Assad capitalized on the fear of radicalization and spillover to legiti-

³¹⁸ Barack Obama, "Press Conference by the President," *White House Office of the Press Secretary*, October 2, 2015, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/10/02/press-conference-president>.

mize the regime's existence by claiming himself as the only alternative to prevent and curb it, thus playing on the fears of the West to foster support for his regime.

The redline rhetoric was thought to be a deterrent not only for the regime but also for other actors covertly supporting the regime. The weakness in backing the narrative with prompt actions emboldened both Russia and Iran to be more assertive. In other words, at least the narrative on the change of calculus triggered a change in the calculus of Assad's supporters, which was eventually observed as increasing determination and assertiveness. They believed that U.S. intervention might change the balance on the ground, which would be detrimental to both Russia and Syria. Hence, particularly Moscow preferred to assist Washington to save face by facilitating the efforts to remove chemical weapons. In that way, Russia also gained a status of arbiter in the Syrian crisis and gained confidence to support the regime in a bolder way. Russia wearily monitored the developments in Washington's domestic politics that revolved on seeking approval from Congress, which would give hints about the hesitance of the future U.S. decisiveness on Syria.³¹⁹

Looked at retrospectively, the uncertainty when merged with the ambiguity of the state-actors, meant that the only remaining actors that could capitalize from the situation were the states that firmly and decisively supported the regime itself and the territorializing non-state actors that would be utilized as proxies. How non-state actors capitalized from the situation was discussed in Chapter 1. Once they started to expand the territories they occupied, the threat perceptions and therefore the strategic calculus of the external states substantially changed, leading them to engage militarily. In other words, the processes of territorialization and deterritorialization urged external actors to intervene directly via their airpower and/or indirectly via proxies. The engagement of states with divergent end-states inevitably brought

³¹⁹ Kanat, *A Tale of Four Augusts*, 152.

about the clash of interests, embedded with the potential to impact their relations through the unintended consequences of their actions. This was observed as the growing distrust between traditional allies, and the growing alignment between old geopolitical rivals.

PROXY WARFARE – SUPPORTING PROXIES THROUGH AIRPOWER

Each conflict has its own distinct and unique characteristics that distinguish it from other conflicts, and Syria does not seem to be an exception. In the previous part, the role of embedded uncertainty on the strategic calculus, decisions, and on the ambiguous behaviors of actors were discussed. This part will examine how the conflict, once mutated and transformed from a civil war into a proxy war, has the capability to condition and alter the behaviors of state actors, how they delegate some of their determinacies to non-state actors, and how this process undermines alliances. Apparently, the way to answer these questions and the features of proxy warfare in the context of Syria should be clarified in more detail. While discussing what makes the Syrian War distinct, its different and continuing characteristics will set the ground to a better understanding of the character of the war. However, there is no intention to locate and discuss the proxy war in Syria in relation to the larger proxy warfare literature.

How did the conflict mutate from civil war into a proxy war, particularly with the inadvertent introduction of non-state actors into the warfare with their subsequent territorialization? How did the conflict once mutated pull the state actors into the crisis? The unintentional territorialization of DAESH, and the intentional territorialization of the PYD/YPG, then the moderate Syrian opposition, started to implicate and determine the nature of relations between the external state actors. So, the question arises of why the state actors opted for proxy warfare. Were they aware and had they thoroughly acknowledged the potential pitfalls inherent in their decision to opt for proxy relations

which might undermine their existing relations with other state actors? All these questions necessitate exploring the reverberating aspects of the conflict.

Karl Deutsch defines a proxy war as “an international conflict between two foreign powers, fought out on the soil of a third country; disguised as a conflict over an internal issue of that country; and using some of that country’s manpower, resources and territory as a means for achieving preponderantly foreign goals and foreign strategies.”³²⁰ Andrew Mumford finds this definition too state-centric as it discounts the role of non-state actors.³²¹ He sees a proxy war as “the indirect engagement in a conflict by third parties wishing to influence its strategic outcome in favor of preferred faction.”³²² His concern about the neglect of non-state actors and incorporating the non-state actors to overcome his concern allows situating the discussion into a more comprehensive framework. He explores why the states prefer proxy warfare instead of direct engagement in his work, and suggests it is appealing as it is accepted as the “warfare of the cheap”³²³ and “reducing the risk of conflict escalation.”³²⁴ Obama’s policy of leading from behind eased not only the inaction but also the preference of the PYD/YPG as a proxy to alter the (de)territorialization and to ensure “ground control without risking American lives.”³²⁵ At first sight, it seems entirely rational to opt for proxy warfare as it politically offers plausible deniability and cost-effective indirect intervention. However, as the non-state actors gain more

³²⁰ Karl W. Deutsch, “External Involvement in Internal Wars,” in Harry Eckstein (ed.), *Internal War: Problems and Approaches* (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1964), 102.

³²¹ Andrew Mumford, *Proxy Warfare*, (Cambridge, Polity, 2013), 13.

³²² *Ibid.*, 1; Andrew Mumford, “Proxy Warfare and the Future of Conflict,” *RUSI Journal* 158, no.2 (2013): 40.

³²³ *Ibid.*, 40.

³²⁴ Mumford, *Proxy Warfare*, 3.

³²⁵ Quoted in Mumford, “Proxy Warfare and the Future of Conflict,” 42, from Philip Bobbitt, *The Shield of Achilles: War, Peace and the Course of History* (New York, NY: Anchor Books, 2003), 331.

autonomy, and as they acquire self-reliance in time, they begin to create some unintended repercussions, as was observed in the relations between Ankara and Washington.

The different motives might drive the preferences of benefactors entering into a proxy-benefactor relationship. But fundamentally, it is an act of “outsourcing”³²⁶ driven by diverging motives. For Iran, plausible deniability and the quest for not adding another spoiling factor to its relations with the West play a more substantial role, while Russia prefers private military companies – the most known one being Wagner – to realize its strategic ends, particularly the risky ones, as was observed in Dayr al-Zor in 2018, when Wagner mercenaries were targeted by the coalition air forces, without causing a direct military confrontation between the U.S. and Russia. Turkey, on the other hand, to avoid escalation with other actors and to sustain the legitimacy of the intervention, opted for proxy warfare by supporting the Free Syrian Army (FSA), as well.

However, proxy warfare “may reduce the conflict escalation, but it risks conflict intensification,” as it was observed in Syria. The intensification of the conflict through the intervention of different actors with diverging end-states further complicates the conflict, leaving the resolution to the capacity of actors to create *de facto* realities on the ground and to gain implicit consent, which will be the basis for the actors’ future political compromise. The danger surfaces when the benefactors lose their control of the proxies as the latter forge different strategic ends that might be in conflict with those of their benefactors.³²⁷ In other words, in the Syrian case, particularly the territorialization of the PYD/YPG and their growing agency, not only stands as an example of the intensification of the conflict but also demonstrates how the U.S. became

³²⁶ Seyom Brown, “Purposes and Pitfalls of War by Proxy: A Systemic Analysis,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 27, no.2 (2016): 244.

³²⁷ Mumford, “Proxy Warfare and the Future of Conflict”, 40.

susceptible to their demands for autonomy or at least the critique posed when the U.S. decided to withdraw its troops from northern Syria in 2019.³²⁸ In fact, an act of outsourcing leads to the intensification of the conflict.

The most negative outcomes probably are the repercussions on the relations between the allies, as was observed in the U.S.-Turkey relations and the striking back by the proxies to the benefactors. How the relations and the preference of the PYD/YPG as a proxy harmed the long-standing relations between the U.S. and Turkey was previously discussed in detail. In terms of striking back, the most favored insurgent group fighting against Russians in the 1980s mutated itself and struck back at the U.S. with 9/11. After almost 20 years of a counter-insurgency operation in Afghanistan, the U.S. unwillingly found itself in a position that seeks a way-out strategy from Afghanistan through negotiating with the Taliban. With regards to the PYD/YPG, the way the PKK established a clandestine tribute network to finance its terrorist activities was highlighted by the former German Minister of Foreign Affairs Sigmar Gabriel.³²⁹ Lastly, in France, PKK supporters infiltrated the yellow vests movement and committed acts of vandalism during the protests, even attacking the building of the Council of Europe.³³⁰ All that reveals and confirms how the proxy intervention might be detrimental to both the benefactors and their allies. In that sense, the arguments that “a proxy relationship is therefore far more impermanent, temperamental, and opportunistic than

³²⁸ Peter Wehner, “Trump Betrayed the Kurds. He Couldn’t Help Himself,” *The Atlantic*, October 15, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/10/trump-betrayed-kurds-whos-next/600004/>.

³²⁹ “PKK Finances Crimes in Turkey with Funds Made from Illegal Activities in Europe, Ex-German FM says,” *Daily Sabah*, October 19, 2019, <https://www.dailysabah.com/war-on-terror/2019/10/19/pkk-finances-crimes-in-turkey-with-funds-made-from-illegal-activities-in-europe-ex-german-fm-says>.

³³⁰ “PKK Terror Group Supporters Attack Council of Europe HQ in Strasbourg, 43 Detained,” *Daily Sabah*, February 25, 2019, <https://www.dailysabah.com/europe/2019/02/25/pkk-terror-group-supporters-attack-council-of-europe-hq-in-strasbourg-43-detained>.

[an] alliance relationship,”³³¹ or the arguments about their fluid nature and openness to fluctuations might be misleading as proxy wars are prone to producing unintended consequences³³² and might create fluctuations in alliance relationships.³³³ These fluctuations are due to the fact that “the fundamental problem with proxy warfare is that the policymakers who instigate it rarely consider the long-term implications of their actions.”³³⁴

In terms of implications on Turkey’s relations with the U.S. and Russia, the PYD/YPG has gained a considerable agency. Moreover, it will be one of the factors that will influence the direction and character of the relations between the capitals in the future. For this reason, the future of the PYD/YPG stands as one of the factors that could spoil or heal the prospects of the relations.

CHANGING CHARACTER OF RELATIONS

The *war continues*, yet to produce outcomes and implicate the nature of actions and relations of the actors, despite it had changed its character. We have discussed how the democratic uprising mutated into a war that forced the external actors to try to attain their goals and eliminate threats, which are still perceived as existing. In fact, the territorialization of threats are still being perceived as threats by the US and Turkey, though they diverge on the fate of the PYD/YPG. For Russia, on the other hand, the deterritorialization of the regime, the current level of territorialization of radical groups around Idlib, and the PYD/YPG occupation of the east of Euphrates constitute the threats that should be eliminated. None of the above contentions

³³¹ Mumford, *Proxy Warfare*, 19; Geraint Alun Hughes, “Syria and the Perils of Proxy Warfare,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 25:3, (2014), 527, 532.

³³² Brian Glyn Williams, “Fighting with a Double-Edged Sword?: Proxy Militias in Iraq, Afghanistan, Bosnia, and Chechnya,” in *Making Sense of Proxy Warfare: States, Surrogates, and the Use of Force*, ed. William Banks, (Lincoln NE: Potomac Books, 2012), 87.

³³³ Rod Thornton, “Problems with the Kurds as Proxies against Islamic State: Insights from the Siege of Kobane,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 26, no.6 (2015):866

³³⁴ Hughes, “Syria and the Perils of Proxy Warfare”, 532.

have been resolved yet, and for that reason, they still retain the capability to determine not only the nature of relations but also the future behavior of the state actors. In other words, how these contentions will be accommodated and how the points of friction will be handled will determine the character of relations.

ANKARA-WASHINGTON: THE FATE OF THE PYD/ YPG AND THE POSTURE ON THE S-400S/F-35S

This section is dedicated to addressing the potential friction points between Washington and Ankara and their potential implications on the character of relations. In fact, despite the deep distrust that is still prevailing, there are also efforts from both sides to revert the process and repair the already damaged relations. Whether these efforts and attempts will be successful remains to be seen. However, along with one of the objectives of this book, laying down the potential friction points that might resurge in the future will be discussed here. What has happened and what is yet to happen are the questions that lead the discussion, as they provide the trajectory for the friction points.

In fact, within the book's framework, two major issues seem most significant in the context of the Syrian War and they still retain their capacity to embitter the relations. One of them stands as the fate of the PYD/YPG. How far can the United States disentangle with the PYD/YPG and is it willing to do so as it still disagrees with Ankara on the nature of its terrorist character? While the U.S. perceives the PYD/YPG as the representatives of the Kurdish minority in Syria, Turkey accepts it as an offshoot of the PKK terrorist organization. The differences regarding the PYD/YPG have already been discussed earlier. The second major issue is the debate revolving around the purchase of the Russian S-400 air defense systems, and the American response to stop the delivery of F-35 fighters and to sanction Turkey with CAATSA. Both topics are quite heated, despite the fact that the capitals managed to cool both of them to an extent, hoping to create a positive agenda.

However, it should also be noted that neither of them seems to step back from its position, which makes the relations still susceptible to another surge of tensions. Nevertheless, Ankara perceives the categorization of the PYD/YPG as a terrorist organization and the halt of the procurement policy as signs of an understanding and recognition of its security concerns by its ally, while the latter is perceived as a sign of recognizing Ankara's agency and strategic autonomy. In fact, both are closely interconnected as they ultimately mean the recognition of Ankara's security concerns, which eventually means the disengagement with the PYD/YPG and its separatist agenda, while refraining from actions that could undermine Turkey's security such as allowing Gülen's residency in the U.S. and threatening Turkey with CAATSA.³³⁵

What happened? When the crisis started in Syria, Turkey was aligned with the U.S. and the West in terms of handling the Syrian crisis, despite some observed differences, such as Turkey's attempts to convince Assad to expand the democratic rights of the Syrian people and to abandon the escalated crackdown strategy. However, the attempts to convince the regime went on deaf ears, Assad started his strategy of transnationalization through exporting the problems into Turkey and creating the grounds for both the radicalization and territorialization of the non-state actors, combined with the inaction of Washington that caused the mutation of the conflict. Consequentially and inadvertently, the process of territorialization/deterritorialization triggered significant changes in external actors' strategic calculus, finally leading them to intervene militarily.

The territorialization of the PYD/YPG with the support of the U.S. to revert the territorialization of DAESH, at the expense of Turkey's security interests, inevitably deepened the distrust between the two traditional allies. The change in strategic calculus, due to the rise of DAESH,

³³⁵ Michael Doran and Michael A. Reynolds, "Turkey Has Legitimate Grievances against the U.S.," *The Wall Street Journal*, October 8, 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/turkey-has-legitimate-grievances-against-the-u-s-11570576128>.

transformed the U.S. policy in Syria, leading it to desire to keep Assad in power with the fear of further radicalization. Furthermore, the *modus operandi* reached with Moscow demonstrated a significant divergence on the future of the regime.³³⁶ In fact, the U.S. inaction before the mutation of the conflict and its misguided action with the rise of DAESH not only brought about the involvement of Russia into Syria militarily but also left Turkey with considerable direct terrorist threats – the deadly peak was between July 2015 and July 2016. However, the worst came when the U.S. preferred to conduct the Raqqa operation with the PYD/YPG instead of Turkey, which increased the heavy arms delivery to the PYD/YPG. Consequently, Turkey suffered the deadliest attacks from the anti-tank guided missiles (ATGM) that were delivered to the PYD/YPG to fight against DAESH but that instead targeted the Turkish Armed Forces. Furthermore, the delivery of man-portable air defense systems (MANPAD) upgraded the PYD/YPG capacity to an organization of similar level to the Lebanese Hezbollah. The U.S. support to the PYD/YPG brought about innovative terrorism, through which the PYD/YPG has introduced drones³³⁷ and tunnel warfare³³⁸ to its tactics, techniques and procedures (TTPs), while “the United States Air Force has transformed itself into something that more closely resembles the Western Kurdistan Air Force.”³³⁹

The negligence regarding the potential and inadvertent implications of choosing the PYD/YPG as a proxy caused the emergence

³³⁶ Edwin Mora, “Obama Official: We Talked to Russia About Syria Because ‘We Worried the Assad Regime Might Finally Collapse,’” *Breitbart*, May 9, 2019, <https://www.breitbart.com/national-security/2019/05/09/obama-official-we-talked-to-russia-about-syria-because-we-worried-the-assad-regime-might-finally-collapse/>

³³⁷ Serkan Balkan, “A Global Battlefield? Rising Drone Capabilities of Non-State Armed Groups and Terrorist Organisations,” *SETA Report*, 2019, 35–38.

³³⁸ Lara Seligman, “Kurdish Fighters Mount Counterattack Using Network of Tunnels,” *Foreign Policy*, October 15, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/10/15/syrian-kurdish-fighters-mount-counterattack-turkish-sdf-network-of-tunnels/#>

³³⁹ Aron Lund, “The Ten Most Important Developments in Syria in 2015,” *Syria Comment* January 3, 2016, <http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/ten-most-important-developments-syria-2015/>.

of grave threats to Turkey, confirming Hughes, who had warned that “the fundamental problem with proxy warfare is that the policymakers who instigate it rarely consider the long-term implications of their actions.”³⁴⁰ Similar warnings and testimonies were already made by government officials as well. Fred Hof, who served as Obama’s special envoy for Syria, admitted the irrevocable links between the YPG and PKK by stating that it “is essentially the Syrian affiliate of the PKK” and acknowledged Washington’s failure to build trust saying, “There was just not a strong attempt to build a relationship and trust and confidence with Turkey.”³⁴¹ Similar warnings were also made, and the dangers were discussed during a senate panel discussion, chaired by U.S. Senator Lindsey Graham, who questioned the links between the PYD/YPG and PKK terrorist organization with the Defense Secretary Ashley Carter and Chief of General Staff General Dunford.³⁴² Both admitted the actual links and acknowledged the dangers inherent in that choice.³⁴³ The Hudson Institute’s Michael Doran and Princeton University’s Michael A. Reynolds also underlined the point that “to dismiss Ankara’s objections to America’s arming of the YPG as mere anti-Kurdish bigotry is ignorant, akin to labelling the fight against al Qaeda as Islamophobia.”³⁴⁴

As the distrust began to characterize the relations and as the PYD/YPG territorialized along its borders, Ankara’s strategic calculus has substantially changed and it decided to militarily intervene to elimi-

³⁴⁰ Hughes, “Syria and the Perils of Proxy Warfare”, 532.

³⁴¹ David Kenner, Molly O’Toole, “The Race to Raqqa Could Cost Trump Turkey,” *Foreign Policy*, March 21, 2017, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/03/21/the-race-to-raqqa-could-cost-trump-turkey/>.

³⁴² “Graham Questions Secretary Carter and General Dunford,” YouTube, October 5, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MQwofJEQ6ng>

³⁴³ Kasim İleri, “US Defense Chief Admits PYD, YPG, PKK Link: Ash Carter Grilled by Lawmaker about US Support to PKK Offshoot in Syria,” *Anadolu Agency*, April 28, 2016, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/world/us-defense-chief-admits-pyd-ypg-pkk-link/563332>.

³⁴⁴ Michael Doran and Michael A. Reynolds, “Turkey Has Legitimate Grievances Against the U.S.,” *The Wall Street Journal*, October 8, 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/turkey-has-legitimate-grievances-against-the-u-s-11570576128>

nate both DAESH and the PYD/YPG along its borders. Turkish military operations in Syria managed to eliminate ISIL/DEASH from the Azaz-Jerablus strip with Operation Euphrates Shield and the PYD/YPG from Afrin with Operation Olive Branch, thus preventing the PYD/YPG from reaching the Eastern Mediterranean and infiltrating into Turkey. Operation Peace Spring did not managed to eliminate the PYD/YPG in the east of Euphrates but, at least, it achieved to clean the strip between Ras al-Ayn and Tal Abyad, and pushed PYD/YPG out of the 20-mile-deep strip with the agreements reached with both the U.S. and Russia.

Although some level of common understanding could be reached with Moscow and Washington, ending Operation Peace Spring, neither has completely stopped its support to the PYD/YPG. Nevertheless, both have significantly downgraded the extent of their support. Notably the U.S., after declaring the victory over DAESH, lost its justification for supporting the PYD/YPG militarily, with the exception of maintaining its presence in the PYD/YPG oil fields in the east of Euphrates aiming to secure them against possible control by remnants of DAESH. On the other hand, the same control continued to ensure the PYD/YPG's ability to sustain itself and remobilize itself if needed, and hampers the regime's access and will in revitalizing the much-needed resources to re-establish control of the east of Euphrates. Beyond keeping the PYD/YPG alive, as a threat for Turkey, the extent to which the regime and Russia will tolerate its existence, remains as a big question mark. The protests in and around Deir al-Zor against the PYD/YPG confirm not only the resentment of the local population but also shed light on the fragility of the PYD/YPG's control.³⁴⁵

³⁴⁵ Suleiman Al-Khalidi, "Arabs in Syria's Deir al-Zor Protest against Ruling Kurdish Militia: Residents," *Reuters*, April 28, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-kurds-protests/arabs-in-syrias-deir-al-zor-protest-against-ruling-kurdish-militia-residents-idUSKCN-1S40RD>; Bassem Mroue, "Anti-Kurdish Protests in East Syria Could Endanger US Plans," *AP News*, May 9, 2019, <https://apnews.com/3314a11ddb2b40fdbfbc689d812fa080>

Out of the trajectory of the developments during the Syrian crisis, the fate of the PYD/YPG emerged as a determining factor for the course of Turkish-American relations, depending on what sort of compromise will be reached. The U.S. seems unwilling to lose its grip on the PYD/YPG, which proved and showcased itself as an employable proxy. In the past, it was utilized by Hafez Assad against Turkey until it was curtailed by the Adana Accords, signed in 1998, and the eventual extradition of PKK Leader Abdullah Öcalan to Turkey in 1999, upon the threat to use force. The striking similarity between the past and the present situation is the utility of force in curbing its impact. However, neither the Adana Accords nor the deals reached with the U.S. and Russia achieved its complete elimination but kept it alive with a reduced capability and a postponement to revive in the future. It should be admitted that the PYD/YPG is still alive, however, with the decline of oil prices thanks to the Covid-19 outbreak, it needs more substantial support from external actors as for the most part it lost its mobilizing capability. How far the U.S. will be willing to provide support seems reduced to a large extent as it requires the allocation of scarce resources that became more valuable in the upcoming great power competition.

While fierce debates were still ongoing, the two allies, Turkey and the U.S., worked jointly on the operation conducted for the killing of DAESH leader Al-Baghdadi in Idlib on October 27, 2019. Yet, the timing and the place of the operation was intended to initiate a propaganda campaign against Turkey. The capture of Baghdadi's sister and another 13 from his inner circle in northern Syria by Turkish forces prevented the campaign from surmounting. The tensions were not limited to those developments. In the aftermath of Operation Peace Spring, the U.S. invited Ferhat Abdi Şahin (code-named Mazloun Kobani, aka Şahin Cilo, the so-called SDF Commander), despite his direct links to the PKK³⁴⁶ to the U.S., almost creating another tension.

³⁴⁶ "Commander of Syrian Democratic Forces Is Terrorist!," *ISW News*, October 27, 2019, <https://english.iswnews.com/8000/commander-of-syrian-democratic-forces-is-terrorist/>

Turkey condemned the U.S. for this invitation and asked for his extradition from the United States. Erdoğan expressed his frustration, saying, “It is very interesting that [the person] code-named Mazloun is a terrorist sought with a red notice... The U.S. should hand over this man to us... We are working on it.”³⁴⁷

In the aftermath of the deal reached on October 17, 2019, both Ankara and Washington tried to push the debate off the agenda, despite continued pressures on the Trump Administration.³⁴⁸ The deal was depicted as Erdoğan’s victory over the U.S. and Trump, and was reported as “Erdoğan’s clean sweep: Turkey gets what it wants in Syria, and Trump lifts sanctions.”³⁴⁹ President Trump was happy to ease the tensions, while Turkey was partially satisfied with postponing the crisis with the U.S., with distancing the PYD/YPG from its borders and delaying their reach to the Eastern Mediterranean.

The second controversial topic that tainted the relations came with the acquisition of S-400 air defense systems from Russia. Washington reacted to the acquisition by suspending Turkey’s partnership from the F-35 Joint Strike Fighters (JSF) program, of which Turkey was a program partner and producer of critical parts rather than a mere customer. The U.S. justification to oust Turkey from the program was based on the claim that the S-400 systems were developed to steal the secrets of the F-35 and argued that the two cannot be operated by the same country, although F-35s have flown several times near the S-400 systems elsewhere. To ease the claims and concerns of Washington, Ankara ensured the systems will be a stand-alone system, will not be integrated to the NATO systems,

³⁴⁷ “Turkey Demands Extradition of Syrian Kurdish Commander from US,” *BBC Monitoring*, October 25, 2019.

³⁴⁸ “Trump’s Turkey Deal Hands Power to Ankara and Leaves Syrian Kurds for Dead,” *The Guardian*, October 18, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/oct/18/trumps-turkey-deal-hands-power-to-ankara-and-leaves-syrian-kurds-for-dead>.

³⁴⁹ “Erdoğan’s Clean Sweep,” *The Wall Street Journal*, October 23, 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/Erdoğans-clean-sweep-11571872754>.

and asked to establish a joint technical committee to search the possible negative implications if any, and remedies to overcome them. However, all were declined by Washington, which demonstrated the arguments being put forward were political rather than technical as Washington claimed.

NATO and other allies preferred to stay out of the debate between Washington and Ankara on this topic. NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg announced that acquisition decisions are national, but they should keep the interoperability of the alliance,³⁵⁰ while the Chief of Military Committee Air Marshal Sir Stuart Peach was quoted as saying, “Acquisition is a national business. It’s not for NATO to choose or advise allies on weapons systems. It’s not NATO’s business.”³⁵¹ French Minister of Defense Florence Parly rebuked the approach of the U.S., saying that “NATO’s solidarity clause is called Article 5, not Article F-35.”³⁵² On the other hand, numerous articles appeared in the media discussing NATO membership, even suggesting Turkey’s exclusion from the alliance as it threatens its existence, or suggesting it as a “terrible idea.”³⁵³ However, tying arms procurement to alliance solidarity did not and will not contribute to the effectiveness of the NATO alliance. Furthermore, there were already other NATO members that have S-300s in their inventories. Turkey’s commitment to NATO was also stressed by Erdoğan during the graduation ceremony of staff officers from the National Defence University (War College) on July 5, 2019,

³⁵⁰ “Turkey Says It Will Not Bow to U.S. Sanctions over S-400 Deal,” *Reuters*, May 5, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-usa-defense/turkey-says-it-will-not-bow-to-u-s-sanctions-over-s-400-deal-idUSKCN1SB06J>.

³⁵¹ Jill Aitoro, “NATO’s Top Military Official Talks Russia, Turkey, and the INF Treaty,” *Defense News*, March 22, 2019, <https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2019/03/22/natos-top-military-official-talks-russia-turkey-and-the-inf-treaty/>.

³⁵² Katie Bo Williams, “French MOD Rebukes Trump Administration for Arms-Sales Focus,” *Defense One*, March 18, 2019, <https://www.defenseone.com/politics/2019/03/french-mod-rebukes-trump-administration-arms-sales-focus/155631/>.

³⁵³ James Stavridis, “Pushing Turkey out of NATO Is a Terrible Idea,” *Bloomberg*, July 18, 2019, <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2019-07-18/kicking-turkey-out-of-nato-would-be-a-gift-to-putin>.

who stated, “As long as we see the same understanding, we will be in solidarity with NATO.”³⁵⁴

The acquisition of the S-400s and removing Turkey from the F-35 program were highly politicized and began to be seen as a matter of national sovereignty,³⁵⁵ overshadowing the possibilities of finding a compromise on the topic. Notably, the U.S. threats to sanction Turkey with CAATSA elevated the crisis to a level that the parties were left with no options but to insist on their positions. One of the infuriating steps came with the letter of Secretary of Defense Patrick Shanahan written to Turkish Minister of Defense Hulusi Akar in a threatening language on June 6, 2019. Shanahan threatened Turkey with not giving the already produced aircraft that were being used for the training of the Turkish pilots in the U.S., ending Turkey’s partnership at the program on July 31, 2019, and reminded the U.S. Congress’s decision to enact sanctions under the CAATSA framework. The leakage of this letter, beyond creating reactions in the public opinion, was observed as a step that was not in line with the diplomatic practice and bureaucratic tradition of serious states. Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar replied to this letter on June 18, though the details were not leaked, stressing that the style and tone of the paper did not fit with the alliance’s solidarity.

This was reminiscent of the crisis of the Lyndon Johnson letter sent to President İsmet İnönü, on June 5, 1964, which was written in a patronizing style. The Shanahan letter probably will be recalled as the second Johnson letter crisis in diplomatic history, while the CAATSA recalled arms embargo on Turkey that was enacted in 1975. However, there are substantial differences in terms of Ankara’s capability to react to any sanctions or an embargo. In 1975, Ankara responded with the

³⁵⁴ “Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan: 15 Temmuz Tam Bir Milli İrade Şahlanışıdır,” *Anadolu Ajansı*, July 5, 2019, <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/turkiye/cumhurbaskani-erdogan-15-temmuz-tam-bir-milli-irade-sahlanisidir/1524219>.

³⁵⁵ Ibrahim al-Marashi, “Turkey’s Missile Dilemma: A Choice between Russia and the US,” *Middle East Eye*, May 28, 2019, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/turkeys-missile-dilemma-choice-between-russia-and-us>.

closure of 21 U.S. military installations and bases stationed in Turkey, and İnönü came out with a discourse of “a new world is to be built, and Turkey will take its place in it” pointing out Turkey’s alternatives at that time. Under the Cold War conditions, Turkey was more constrained in terms of agential behavior and economically more vulnerable to adopt a challenging posture.³⁵⁶ However, it is noteworthy to underline that the growing relations with the Soviet Union helped Turkey to accelerate its industrialization with heavy industry investments in metallurgy. The Soviet-Turkey cooperation on industrialization brought about the trajectory of an industrializing Turkey and a subsequent growing agency in time. In terms of impacts, to compare two different periods, the defense industry was heavily reliant on the West, reaching 90 percent, which has currently decreased to 30 percent. Based on this trajectory, Turkey thwarted the threats of sanctions with retaliation.

As a reaction, Turkey identified two options, which were either looking for alternatives such as procurement of Russian Su-57s or accelerating the TF-X, the Turkish indigenous 5th-generation stealth fighter building project, to compensate the loss of ability to procure F-35s. The latter was preferred since purchasing jet fighters would mean a sort of dependency.³⁵⁷ In that sense, Turkey seems happy with the prospect that emerged by being ousted from the F-35 program. Otherwise, for at least another 30 years Turkey would be dependent and reliant on the U.S., and on an aircraft whose operational capability is questioned by some. The debate questioning the operational capability of the F-35 Joint Stealth Fighter (JSF) project is still continuing since it has many problems that are below expectations.³⁵⁸

³⁵⁶ Hasan Yükselen, *Strategy and Strategic Discourse in Turkish Foreign Policy*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 141-168.

³⁵⁷ Burak Bir, “National Warplane Turkey’s Best Response to F-35,” *Anadolu Agency*, February 5, 2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/turkey/national-warplane-turkey-s-best-response-to-f-35/1725269>

³⁵⁸ Ryan Pickrell, “Here Are 5 of the Worst Weapons Projects the US Military Has in the Works,” *Business Insider*, May 30, 2019, <https://www.businessinsider.com/5-of-the-us-militarys-worst-modern-warfare-projects-2019-5?r=US&IR=T>.

Beyond concerns about its operational capability, the F-35 JSF has led the discussions that highlight the impacts on the NATO alliance of the CAATSA as it would have undermined the operational capability of already existing U.S.-origin equipment that is in use. A possible capacity loss by the Turkish Air Forces due to CAATSA sanctions raised concerns about U.S. reliability and raised questions on whether the U.S. is planning an attack on its ally. Furthermore, the tensions exacerbated the anti-American sentiments in the public and might have moved Turkey closer to Russia.³⁵⁹ Some defense analysts were aware of the danger and suggested refraining from sanctions,³⁶⁰ arguing that keeping Turkey within the alliance is crucial to keeping NATO's deterrence capability against Russia.³⁶¹

While debates were ongoing, the first batch of S-400 air defense systems arrived in Ankara on July 12, 2019. Western media reported this as a defiance to the U.S. while the date of delivery coincided with July 12, 1947, the American Assistance Agreement, an embedded hidden message as part of the Russian information campaign. The U.S. enacted sanctions on July 15, on the anniversary of the coup attempt. A Turkish media outlet with Eurasianist orientation portrayed the delivery as enunciating the creation of a new world order.³⁶² Neither the “defiance” nor the “enunciation of a new world order” characterize the delivery, though it represents Ankara's enhancing agency. The

³⁵⁹ Seçkin Köstem, “Russian-Turkish Cooperation in Syria: Geopolitical Alignment with Limits,” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, February 3, (2020): 12, doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2020.1719040.

³⁶⁰ Jamie McIntyre, “US Seeks to Preserve Alliance with Turkey, Despite Rift over Russian Missiles,” *The Washington Examiner*, July 18, 2019, <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/policy/defense-national-security/us-seeks-to-preserve-alliance-with-turkey-despite-rift-over-russian-missiles>.

³⁶¹ Peter Roberts and Seth Newkirk, “Turkey, the US and the S-400: A Counter-Narrative,” *RUSI*, August 15, 2019, <https://rusi.org/commentary/turkey-us-and-s-400-counter-narrative>.

³⁶² “Perinçek: S-400’ler Yeni Dünyanın Kuruluşunu Bildirmektedir,” *Aydınlık*, July 12, 2019, <https://www.aydinlik.com.tr/perincek-s-400-ler-yeni-dunyanin-kurulusunu-bildirmektedir-politika-temmuz-2019-1>.

discourse of defiance is misleading as Turkey several times in the last decade asked for the acquisition of the Patriot air defense systems to overcome its fundamental shortage in air defense. In that sense, rather than a choice or defiance, the decision was an inevitable outcome of an ongoing necessity that emerged out of an increasing threat perception, given the fact that Turkey is within the range of states that own ballistic missiles. The rejection of Ankara's several requests in the past decade to purchase Patriot systems and Washington's indifference to Ankara were admitted by Trump during the G-20 summit in Osaka.³⁶³ Although the tensions were eased upon Turkey's announcement that the systems will be activated in April 2020, the two countries preferred not to talk about the problems, while Erdoğan announced that Turkey would not withdraw from the S-400 deal, but will consider the acquisition of Patriot systems as well if they are offered "under suitable conditions," pointing out the competitive price and technology transfer aspects of the procurement. However, no meaningful progress could be achieved on Patriots so far.

The tensions did not ease as Operation Peace Spring added new ones, as discussed earlier. However, one of the most significant moments came with provocative bills of the U.S. Congress and Senate. The U.S. Congress on October 29, 2019 and the Senate on December 12, 2019 passed a bill that recognized the 1915 events as a "genocide." The voting of the bill on the anniversary of the foundation of the Republic of Turkey created significant dismay as it was perceived that Washington's intent was to create unrepairable damage to the bilateral relations. In the aftermath of the bill, Turkey, for the first time, brought the closure of Incirlik Air Base and Kurecik Radar Station to the table. It was a bold move that raised questions in the West, particularly within NATO, as Incirlik hosts U.S. tactical nuclear bombs,

³⁶³ Çağan Koç and Margaret Talev, "Trump Says Obama Treated Erdogan Unfairly on Patriot Missile," *Bloomberg*, June 29, 2019, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-06-29/erdogan-says-no-setback-on-missile-system-deliveries-from-russia>.

and Kurecik hosts NATO Missile Defense System's radar. The closure has the potential to degrade NATO's deterrence against Russia and Iran, and the capability to project power to the Middle East, while it can constrain the U.S. power projection capability, as well. The question surfaces of whether Turkey will respond and whether it is capable of responding in that way. In fact, the statement of closing down Incirlik and Kurecik should be read within its historical trajectory, which points out historical instances. Previously, responding to the U.S. embargo in 1975 and in the Cold War conditions, Turkey closed 21 U.S. bases and installations. Therefore, should Washington further attempt to bully Turkey and neglect its security concerns, Kurecik and Incirlik appear likely to be added as a further example of the 1975 closures.

As of May 2020, due to the outbreak of the coronavirus, the two states became more inward-looking rather than increasing their external engagements. Regarding the PYD/YPG, to a great extent the tensions could be alleviated despite the PYD/YPG's attempts to infiltrate FSA-held territories, and though they continued to be eliminated. However, most recently, on April 28, 2020, the PYD/YPG terrorists infiltrated Afrin and conducted a terrorist car bomb attack against civilians causing 40 deaths, including 11 children.³⁶⁴ Erdoğan's statements on May 5, 2020 pointed out Turkey's growing discontent with the parties that are responsible for keeping the PYD/YPG away from the FSA-controlled area and hinted at possible steps (read operations), against the PYD/YPG, if Russia and the U.S. fail to control its harassing terrorist attacks.³⁶⁵ Regarding the S-400s, which was previously announced to be activated in April 2020, it was postponed due to the coronavirus

³⁶⁴ Ömer Koparan and Lale Köklü Karagöz, "Afrin'de Bomba Yüklü Tankerle Terör Saldırısı: 11'i Çocuk 40 Ölü," *Anadolu Agency*, April 28, 2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/dunya/afrinde-bomba-yuklu-tankerle-teror-saldirisi-11-i-cocuk-40-olu/1821627>.

³⁶⁵ Jeyhun Aliyev and Dilara Hamit, "Turkey Will No Longer Tolerate Harassment in Syria Safe Zone," *Anadolu Agency*, May 4, 2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/turkey-will-no-longer-tolerate-harassment-in-syria-safe-zone/1828977>.

outbreak while affirming the intent of its activation.³⁶⁶ Both topics have the potential to jeopardize the relations and trigger another wave of tensions, as neither Turkey nor the U.S. seem willing to step back from their respective positions.

ANKARA-MOSCOW: THE FATE OF PYD/YPG AND THE POSTURE ON IDLIB

Similar to the Ankara-Washington axis, the potential friction points that could afflict the relations between Ankara and Moscow still prevail. Two of them stand out as they constitute the problems that will shed light on the future character of relations. The first potential friction point is directly related to the fate of the PYD/YPG, and the second is the Russian posture on Idlib. These two have the potential of direct security implications for Turkey. This section will discuss the extent to which the two capitals can reconcile their postures on the issues. Unlike with the U.S., an oscillation between war and alliance was observed in the relations with Moscow, which still remain under test. What happened and what is yet to happen are again the questions to help identify the trajectory and to reach a meaningful prospective analysis.

As was observed in the Ankara-Washington relations, the distrust also severely implicated the Ankara-Moscow relations. Comparatively, the latter triggered more significant outcomes and debates as the two countries were on the brink of war with the jet incident and tested the alignment with the Astana process. Despite this, Russia and Turkey seemed to overcome the negative impacts of the jet incident, exhibited more close cooperation in Syria, and managed to create a common ground on the basis of territorial integrity. Still they could not completely align their differences as the territorial-

³⁶⁶ Dominic Evans and Orhan Coşkun, "Coronavirus Puts Missile Showdown between Turkey and U.S. on Hold," *Reuters*, April 20, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-turkey-usa/coronavirus-puts-missile-showdown-between-turkey-and-u-s-on-hold-idUSKBN22224M>.

ization/deterritorialization continued to condition their approach to Syrian matters.

When the crisis started, Russia had a much clearer end-state in Syria, defined as keeping a friendly regime in power to sustain its reach to the Mediterranean and the Middle East through basing rights. However, the deterritorialization of the regime, and the consequent threatening of Russian interests, led to the eventual intervention starting from September 2015 onwards. The Iranian delegation's visit to Moscow was a determining factor in encouraging Moscow to intervene militarily upon Assad's inability to resist the expansion of the opposition groups and DAESH.³⁶⁷ Russia, as discussed above, preferred to craft a strategy tailored to curbing the Western efforts that were capable of enticing a regime change in Syria similar to Libya, where the non-use of veto power of Russia at the UNSC was utilized by France to initiate a unilateral military action against the Kaddafi regime leading Libya into a cycle of instability. They employed a diplomatic approach that blocked the creation of a legitimate ground for a regime change. This strategy can be labelled as the *denial of regime change* (DORC) supplemented with arms delivery to sustain the regime's fighting capacity. However, as with the rise of non-state actors, the strategy of DORC failed to curb the deterritorialization of the regime, especially after the rise of DAESH. Russia responded to the U.S. involvement and the assignment of the PYD/YPG as a proxy and its eventual territorialization at the expense of deterritorialization of DAESH by changing its strategy. Moscow's new strategy can be conceived as DORC supplemented with *anti-access/area denial* (A2/AD) as the deployment of S-400 air defense systems established an effective A2/AD, particularly against Turkey's potential military engagement in Syria. The Russian jet downing incident resulted in both

³⁶⁷ Laila Bassam and Tom Perry, "How Iranian General Plotted out Syrian Assault in Moscow," *Reuters*, October 6, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-soleimani-insigh-idUSKCN0S02BV20151006>.

a qualitative and quantitative shift of Russian military existence as it added an air defense component to already ongoing airstrikes. While the Russian military involvement led to the jet incident, the deployment of S-400s contained Turkey's options for a strategy change. It would not be an exaggeration to claim that the A2/AD was first enacted against Turkey in the Syrian context.

What caused this collision of interests, showcased with the jet incident, was already discussed in the previous chapter. In short, it emanated from the distrust and incompatibility of end-states. Both Moscow and Ankara acted on the perception of grave threats to their security, which were diverging significantly. The main divergence was on the deterritorialization of the regime as they were both at odds. Moscow considered the increasing role and influence of Ankara as detrimental to its strategy since Syria was, and still is, "existential for its strategy,"³⁶⁸ and therefore in order to maintain its foothold, to be effective, and to be a vital actor in the Middle East, Moscow thought the Turkey's influence should be contained.³⁶⁹ However, the diplomatic blockage of Moscow and Assad's efforts to transnationalize the Syrian conflict, by allowing the territorialization of the PYD/YPG created a grave threat to Turkey, particularly in the aftermath of the U.S. employment of the PYD/YPG as a proxy. The picture, at that time, was the containment of Turkey with the efforts of Moscow and Washington, which brought an alienation of Turkey from Syria which in turn started to create severe threats to its security.

As Turkey acknowledged the deadlock in the Syrian theater and as the relations with the U.S. were thought to be irreversibly at odds after the coup attempt in Turkey and the U.S. flirtation with the PYD/YPG, and as Moscow acknowledged that Turkey's existence on the basis of territorial integrity might be a contributing factor to keeping Syria

³⁶⁸ Oktay Tanrısever, "Türkiye-Rusya Krizinin Dinamikleri ve İkili İlişkilerine Etkileri", *Bilge Strateji*, 8, no.14 (2016): 11.

³⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.

united, and finally as Moscow perceived the coup attempt as detrimental to its regional strategy, both Moscow and Ankara initiated a process of reconciliation in the Syrian context. When examined retrospectively, Russia preferred to give a tailored response after the jet incidence rather than reciprocating in the same way. Moscow's tailored response can be characterized as firm, assertive, and goal-oriented, but not openly revanchist and reckless in nature, despite the fact that it was the expected response. Nevertheless, Russia still opted for an implicit, indirect, and covert response. It can be suggested that behind this tailored response Moscow formulated its reactions with a global mindset rather than merely focusing on regional dynamics, and acknowledging that further tensions might be detrimental to its broader strategic interests. Otherwise, its strategy in Syria and the competition with the West might be hindered or totally collapse.

Even though they reconciled on the basis of Syrian territorial integrity and seemed to acknowledge its centrality for the security of Turkey and the strategy of Russia, they aligned their approach through the Astana process. However, Turkey's support to the Free Syrian Army/Syrian National Army and the Russian ambivalent approach to the PYD/YPG remain contentious points, susceptible to an escalation of frictions. However, from a broader perspective, they share an understanding that any friction might disrupt their strategic calculus and undermine the gains already achieved.

Russia recognizes neither the PKK nor the PYD/YPG as a terrorist organization and during the process has not hesitated to leverage the PYD/YPG against Turkey, whenever it deemed necessary to counter-balance Turkey's unilateralism. Moscow's contemporary resistance and ambivalence to recognizing the PYD/YPG/PKK as a terrorist organization proves Moscow's doubt about Ankara's position on the Assad regime and the future of Syria. The opposite also confirms Ankara's ongoing distrust of Moscow. Moscow, actually, strived to ease Ankara's concerns by suggesting the revival of the Adana Accords of 1998, as a

legal basis for the future political settlement in Syria.³⁷⁰ On the other hand, the regime's deal with the PYD/YPG and the subsequent takeover of the control of the cities increased skepticism in Ankara about the regime and Russian plans for the future. Yet, the regime control and expansion towards the PYD/YPG-held cities were not perceived as detrimental to Turkey's security. When push comes to shove, Turkey prefers a state authority instead of non-state actors, given the fact that the former is accepted as more reliable and accountable. But the future content of the link and a possible autonomy will determine whether the PYD/YPG will be a point of contention. Apart from Turkey's discontent with the PYD/YPG, it actually poses a threat to the unity of Syria. Particularly the future of Raqqah and Deir al-Zor will signify how far Russia and the regime will be tolerant, as the current situation is not sustainable for the regime. A similar line of argument is also applicable to the Turkey-backed FSA. The content and scope of how the regime and the opposition will compromise will be determining factors as well. From a broader perspective, Moscow and Ankara should focus on a formulation in which neither the PYD/YPG nor the FSA will pose formidable threats.

The second contentious point is stranded on the future of Idlib. As was discussed earlier, Turkey and Russia have established a *modus operandi* on Idlib with the Astana and Sochi Agreements. Turkey's main concerns over Idlib are twofold. The first one is to keep the region stable to prevent another refugee influx that could be triggered by an operation either by the regime or the PYD/YPG. In other words, Turkey, by establishing the Idlib demilitarization zone, tried to prevent its current composition from becoming another pretext for an operation that could bring about another wave of territorialization at the expense of Turkey's concerns, which constitutes the second concern. The existence of radical groups in the region was a concern for Russia as well.

³⁷⁰ "Turkish President Promises to Create Security Zone in Syria in Coming Months," *TASS*, January 25, 2019, <https://tass.com/world/1041819>.

However, Turkey claimed they could be deradicalized without creating severe humanitarian, demographic, and security concerns, and rejected the regime and Russia's approach of treating the whole population as terrorists. In the aftermath of the Idlib demilitarized zone, several times Moscow reiterated its criticism over Ankara's inability to curb the activities of the HTS.³⁷¹ In fact, Turkey, too, observed the situation and activities of the HTS with discontent. However, Turkey hesitated to take robust measures to prevent any humanitarian crisis.

The composition of the HTS creates this discontent as it mainly consists of two groups. The first group comprises different radical groups that were mainly funded by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, and are resistant to any reconciliation or deradicalization efforts. The second group is more moderate and offers the potential to be deradicalized, driven by mostly anti-regime sentiments, and stands closer to the FSA. The first group has expelled the FSA out of Idlib. Russia, too, is mainly concerned about the first group, as they remind Moscow of the old stereotypes of Afghanistan and the Chechen Wars. Even the FSA is treated from this perspective, namely mostly with the fear of possible infiltration of radicalized elements into the FSA and their eventual and possible travel into Russia. As discussed above, the basic test of trust between Moscow and Ankara will be on the fate of the FSA and the PYD/YPG, since both countries are quite reluctant to change their stance - most notably Turkey's reluctance concerning the PYD/YPG.

With the establishment of the observation posts, Turkey managed to keep another 4 million refugees within the borders of Idlib, which prevented further refugee burdens and potential friction with the EU. Syria, on the other hand, managed to reunite the country by a phased strategy. With the Russian involvement and the Astana

³⁷¹ "Russia Says It's Turkey's Duty to Stop Fighting in Syria's Idlib," *The Moscow Times*, May 31, 2019, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/05/31/russia-says-its-turkeys-duty-to-stop-fighting-in-syrias-idlib-a65830>.

process, the Syrian regime managed to revert the deterritorialization and increased its control from 20 percent to 65 percent of the country. In other words, through the Astana process, Moscow and Ankara ensured the territorial integrity of Syria. Idlib still stands as one of the last strongholds of the opposition after the territories held by the PYD/YPG. Retaking control of the PYD/YPG-held territories is beyond the strength of the regime as the PYD/YPG is supported by the coalition and the U.S. This fact eliminates its military resolution to a political one, which is confirmed with the latest efforts of the U.S. and France to integrate the PYD/YPG into the Kurdish National Council. In this way, any incorporation of the PYD/YPG would mean another attempt of attributing legitimacy to a terrorist organization and the replication of rebranding similar to the SDF.³⁷²

Idlib started to spoil the relations, which were based on selective cooperation, with the regime advance and Russian air support for Idlib starting in April 2019 and intensified in August 2019. Turkey responded to the regime's attacks by increasing its foothold in Idlib. One of the most critical attacks came when the regime forces captured Khan Sheikhoun on August 23, 2019 and encircled the Turkish observation post risking a military confrontation. Turkey did not withdraw from the post, and despite this the regime attacked a Turkish convoy heading to the post on August 19. As a result, the regime advance displaced 70,000 civilians and pushed them near the Turkish border out of the regime's indiscriminate fire, confirming Turkey's concerns.³⁷³ Turkey and Russia managed to stop the regime advance and agreed on additional steps regarding the terrorists during the

³⁷² Serhat Erkmen, "Fırat'ın Doğusunda Yeni Denklem: Kürtler Suriye'nin Geleceğine Nasıl Hazırlanıyor?," *Fikir Turu*, May 22, 2020, <https://fikirturu.com/jeo-politik/firatin-dogusunda-yeni-denklemler-kurtler-suriyenin-geleceğine-nasil-hazırlanıyor/>.

³⁷³ Recep Tayyip Erdoğan "How Turkey Sees the Crisis with the West," *The New York Times*, August 10, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/10/opinion/turkey-erdogan-trump-crisis-sanctions.html?action=click&module=Opinion&pgtype=Home> page.

Erdoğan-Putin summit on August 27, 2019.³⁷⁴ But diverging perspectives on Idlib also surfaced as Erdoğan reminded Putin of the de-escalation zone in Idlib and depicted the latest developments as a violation of the agreements. However, Moscow declined the claims over Idlib. On the other hand, the date coincided with Erdoğan's visit to the MAKS 19 Air Show and the arrival of the second batch of the S-400s to Ankara, messaging their intent to intensify military cooperation and demonstrate that Turkey has other viable options to the F-35 JSFs.

The second significant advance of the regime came with the capture of Ma'arat al-Numan in December 2019. The major advances created a disturbance in Turkey as it marked the regime's intent to control Idlib. In fact, Putin expressed his discontent with the foreign military presence in Syria and urged all foreign troops to leave, especially those that were not invited,³⁷⁵ hinting that the alignment with Turkey is temporary. The two significant regime advances in Syria raised the question of how long Turkey's existence will be tolerated by Moscow and Damascus, pointing to an inevitable confrontation in Idlib.

While a confrontation was taking place on the ground, Ankara and Damascus were undertaking consultations to solve the problems through their intelligence services. The meeting of Hakan Fidan, head of the Turkish National Intelligence Organization, and Ali Memluk, the head of Syrian Intelligence Service in Moscow, on January 12, 2020, was perceived as a sign of tacit approval of the regime's existence, or at least as an attempt to seek grounds for the resolution of tensions between Ankara and Damascus, which was also reported by the Syrian

³⁷⁴ "Russia, Turkey Agree Steps to Tackle Militants in Syria's Idlib: Putin," *Reuters*, August 27, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-security-russia-turkey/russia-turkey-agree-steps-to-tackle-militants-in-syrias-idlib-putin-idUSKCN1VH0M8>.

³⁷⁵ "Syria Must Be Freed from Military Presence: Putin," *Reuters*, October 12, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-security-putin/syria-must-be-freed-from-foreign-military-presence-putin-idUSKBN1WR09X>.

National News Agency, SANA, and Reuters.³⁷⁶ Erdoğan also publicized and replied to the question stating that “the consultations are going well,” on January 20, 2020. Putin, a day before, underlined the cooperation between Ankara and Moscow when he stated, “We have truly built very kind, constructive, trusting relations ... the dialogue is not easy, it is business, but we have learned to reach agreements, search for and find compromises suitable for both sides.”³⁷⁷ However, the resumption of the Syrian Armed Forces’ operations in Idlib embittered the relations, which came to a breaking point when the regime attacked the newly established observation posts on February 3, 2020 near Saraqib in Idlib, causing the death of 8 Turkish soldiers. FM Çavuşoğlu reacted to the attacks saying that “the Astana and Sochi processes were harmed” on February 4, while Erdoğan underlined the strategic relations with Russia, denounced any conflict and war with Russia, and did not refrain from warning the regime that “if the Syrian regime will not retreat from Turkish observation posts in Idlib in February, Turkey itself will be obliged to make this happen.” He urged Moscow “to rein in its ally Assad to stop the bloodshed.”³⁷⁸

However, another airstrike by the regime towards the Turkish elements in Syria was carried out on February 27, 2020, causing 37 deaths and injuring nearly 40. Though there were allegations blaming Russia for the airstrike, Moscow declined these claims and pointed to the regime. Turkey responded to the regime attack by commencing Operation Peace Shield towards the regime, and pro-Iranian militias that support it. Though the operation failed to regain the control of the M5 Highway, it stopped the regime advance with a toll of 3,138

³⁷⁶ “Turkish, Syrian Top Spies Meet in First Official Contact in Years,” *Reuters*, January 13, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-security-turkey/turkish-syrian-top-spies-meet-in-first-official-contact-in-years-idUSKBN1ZC2BJ>.

³⁷⁷ “Russia and Turkey Have Learned to Compromise, Putin Says,” BBC Monitoring, January 19, 2020.

³⁷⁸ Emin Avundukluoğlu, “Assad Must Leave Turkey’s Idlib Posts Alone: President,” *Anadolu Agency*, February 5, 2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/assad-must-leave-turkeys-idlib-posts-alone-president/1724953>.

soldiers, 151 tanks, 99 cannons and howitzers, around 100 armored military vehicles and trucks, eight helicopters, three drones, three aircraft (including two Russian-made Sukhoi Su-24s and one L-39), eight air defense systems (six SA-22 Pantsir S1, and two SA-17 Buk-M1) and a headquarters, among other military equipment and facilities.³⁷⁹ Notably, the effectiveness and success of Turkish armed drones against the air defense systems and against Syrian jets, in spite of Russian control of Syrian air space, surprised the regime causing it to stop its operation.³⁸⁰ On March 5, 2020, Erdoğan and Putin met in Moscow to broker a ceasefire in Idlib, reflecting the new de facto situation on the ground. The agreement included the joint patrol of the M4 Highway that connects Latakia to Aleppo and recognition of regime control of M5 Highway. The regime with the latest advance gained access to one of the arteries that connect north to the south, therefore, increasing the viability of the economy. Assad captured a chance to revive the country's crumbling economy, and militarily acknowledged his limits as the air defense systems were ineffective against Turkey's drone and electronic warfare capabilities. The introduction of a new drone warfare doctrine made the Russian-supported Syrian air defense superiority, its primary strength, irrelevant, and therefore, constrained the regime's military options, pushing it to a political resolution of the problem. In the aftermath of the deal, Turkey strived to honor the deal reached with the Russians by controlling and even eliminating the HTS, and militarily intensified its military deployment in order to establish a de facto no-fly safe zone. The projection of Turkish authority to the region also sped up the process of peeling off the local population from HTS, slowly introduced deradicalization to the region, and facilitated the identification of radical elements that should be eliminated. Moreover,

³⁷⁹ "Bahar Kalkanı Harekâtı'na İlişkin Açıklama," *Turkish Ministry of National Defence*, March 4, 2020, <https://www.msb.gov.tr/SlaytHaber/432020-23134>.

³⁸⁰ Ali Bakeer, "The Fight for Syria's Skies: Turkey Challenges Russia with New Drone Doctrine," *Middle East Institute*, March 26, 2020, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/fight-syrias-skies-turkey-challenges-russia-new-drone-doctrine>.

Operation Peace Shield resulted in the long-lasting ceasefire in Idlib, whereas the previous ceasefires were used by the regime forces to reorganize themselves in order to resume another round of attacks.

From a broader perspective, the crisis over Idlib shifted Turkey's focus away from the PYD/YPG, causing confusion on the pre-eminence of Turkey's security concerns. This confusion can be regarded as an artificial one since both the radical groups in Idlib and PYD/YPG are approached from the perspective of territorialization. Whereas the PYD/YPG's territorialization was perceived as a terrorism threat to Turkey and a threat to Syria's territorial integrity, Idlib was considered more as a refugee-connected one, at first glance, and, if destabilized, a territorial integrity one if the PYD/YPG took control of the region. On the other hand, the regime's territorialization and retaking of control of Idlib bears the risk of treating it as a bargaining chip against the PYD/YPG in order to gain its loyalty in exchange for leaving Idlib to their control under a sort of loose autonomy, which would mean its reach to the Mediterranean Sea. Turkey's approach to the region is handled with a holistic approach, in which the refugees and terrorism are treated as interconnected dynamics that could end Turkey's influence on the future of Idlib and Syria. In other words, the territorialization of the regime and the PYD/YPG are perceived as harmful for Turkey's security concerns, which might exclude Turkey from the political resolution process, making Ankara susceptible to the outcomes of their compromises. Acting on this mindset, Turkish state institutions preferred to adopt a holistic approach to the problem despite the fact that pro-Russian or Eurasianist media promoted the distinctiveness of the two, and suggested focusing more on the issues that created tensions with the U.S.³⁸¹

In this context, Idlib continues to be one of the potential friction points between Moscow and Ankara. Several attempts to spoil the deal were already placed. For example, Mohammed bin Zayed (MBZ), the

³⁸¹ "Hedefte Saparsan Tuzağa Düşersin," *Aydınlık*, February 21, 2020, <https://www.aydinlik.com.tr/haber/hedefte-saparsan-tuzaga-dusersin-201364>.

crown prince of Abu Dhabi, made several attempts to get Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to break a ceasefire with Turkish-backed rebels in Idlib province, offering him \$5 billion in exchange. Such a sum is severely needed by Assad to sustain his control and demonstrate governance capability on the controlled territories.³⁸² Furthermore, the HTS leaders tried to block and undermine the Russia-Turkey joint patrols. Upon growing tensions, Turkey targeted two emirs of the HTS on April 26, who were blocking the M4 Highway in order to bring about the failure of the joint patrols, thus aiming to demonstrate the ineffectiveness of the deal reached with Russia. However, on May 20, Turkey announced that the 12th joint patrol was successfully conducted.

What will happen next is widely dependent on the developments on the ground and the parties' capability to sustain their control of the proxies they govern. Syria is economically under pressure, and the M4/M5 highways stands as the arteries that might revive economic viability and strategic access to the country. Moscow insisted on the regime's control of the highways so as to reduce the burden on itself since its limited resources constrain long-term and expensive engagements. On the other hand, some reports revealed the discontent between Moscow and Damascus, and suggested that the Astana countries agreed on the removal of Assad from power.³⁸³ Even though these reports cannot be seen as reliable facts, at least, they point to the growing discontent in Moscow regarding Assad, and contingencies on the future of Assad, which bear prospects of decreasing dissonance between Ankara and Moscow.

³⁸² David Hearst, "EXCLUSIVE: Mohammed bin Zayed Pushed Assad to Break Idlib Ceasefire," *Middle East Eye*, April 8, 2020, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/abu-dhabi-crown-prince-mbz-assad-break-idlib-turkey-ceasefire>

³⁸³ Cengiz Tomar, "Esed Hanedanının Çöküşü ve Alternatifleri," *Anadolu Ajansı*, April 28, 2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/analiz/gorus-esed-hanedaninin-cokusu-ve-alternatifleri/1821287>; Henri Meyer and Ilya Arkipov, "Putin Has a Syria Headache and the Kremlin Is Blaming Assad," *Bloomberg*, April 28, 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-04-28/putin-has-a-syria-headache-and-the-kremlin-s-blaming-assad>; "Report: Russia, Turkey, Iran Agree to Remove Syria's Assad," *Middle East Monitor*, May 4, 2020, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200504-report-russia-turkey-iran-agree-to-remove-syrias-assad/>.

CONCLUSION

The core research question posed and explored in this book is defined as “Which characteristics (changing or enduring) of the Syrian War caused Turkey and Russia to oscillate between the extremes of war and alliance?” Given the character of the conflict represented a proxy war waged to alter the dynamics of territorialization and deterritorialization of non-state actors, which were perceived and categorized as threats, state actors found themselves being conditioned by their growing agency that afflicted their relations. The next question posed was the following: what makes state actors cooperate while carrying on/ being forced to accommodate diverging strategic ends, conditioned by unbalanced military power and laden with contentious agendas? And, “How do proxy wars alter the relations between inter-state relations and within alliances?” The answers to those questions will also shed light on *what matters for Turkey*.

The mutation of the Syrian War has introduced ominous security challenges reviving Turkey’s security concerns and consequentially revising its positioning towards the changing nature of the crisis. In fact, Turkey acknowledged that its ability to “exert change was more limited than anticipated,” which is a miscalculation that was partially generated with the encouraging support delivered to Ankara by the U.S.

and the EU.³⁸⁴ However, as the Arab Spring turned out to be a failure with the prolonging Syrian War, and with the West's tacit approval of the coup in Egypt in 2013, the dynamics of the crisis substantially transformed. The initial euphoria of the Arab Spring, promising to end the causal dynamics that bring about terrorist/extremist actors, was squelched with the coup d'état in Egypt and the deteriorating situation in Syria. Those two significant developments curbed hope, as they suppressed the social forces generating it, and instead, unleashed the territorialization of terrorist groups. In this context, Turkey's soft power-based strategy became irrelevant as the hard power assets outpaced the primary means to be allocated in realpolitik-driven circumstances, leaving Turkey without means to realize its strategic ends.³⁸⁵ The West's hesitance to remove Assad from power and its resistance to halting support to the PYD/YPG led Ankara to revise its strategy, which was transformed into a more realist and rationalist one,³⁸⁶ adjusted to the new requirements shaped by the change of the West's policy in Syria.

Before the mutation, Turkey preferred to act along with the West. However as its efforts to convince the Assad regime failed and as the terrorist groups introduced different scales of territorialization with an eventual goal of establishing proto-states, a divergence and the improvisation of the external actors' strategies became imminent. As a response, the state actors' threat perceptions inevitably forced them to adapt their strategic calculus. The U.S., with the territorialization of DAESH, Russia, with the deterritorialization of the regime, and finally Turkey, with the territorialization of the PYD/YPG, introduced new strategies. With the strategy changes, the character of war also

³⁸⁴ Ziya Öniş, "Turkey and the Arab Spring: Between Ethics and Self-Interest," *Insight Turkey* 14, no.3 (2012): 53.

³⁸⁵ Yükselen, *Strategy and Strategic Discourse in Turkish Foreign Policy*, 223.

³⁸⁶ Hüseyin Bağcı, "Son On Yıllık Dönemin Dış Politikasına Gerçekçi Bir Yaklaşım: Hatalardan Doğrulara Dönüş mü?," in *Türk Dış Politikasını Nasıl Bilirdiniz?*, Ümit Özdağ and Yelda Demirağ (eds.), 111-124, (Ankara: Kripto, 2017), 115.

transformed into a proxy war, and the divergence of end-states became gradually incompatible and even conflicting.

Turkey's relations with both Washington and Moscow were also heavily afflicted after the military engagement of both through airpower in support of their proxies, which not only introduced ambiguity of behaviors but also worsened the degree of uncertainty that was already heavily embedded. Within this context, Turkey was stranded from the source of problems due to Washington's growing proxy relationship with the PYD/YPG, and due to the indiscriminate Russian airstrikes, especially on Turkmen regions, close to its borders causing an additional high number of refugee influx into Turkey. Turkey had already derailed \$40 billion from its resources to refugees while the EU failed to honor its pledges and agreements on burden-sharing with Ankara. Consequentially, Turkey experienced a cycle of growing distrust with Washington, a traditional NATO ally, and tested the two extremes -war and alliance- with its traditional rival, Moscow. The situation became quite complicated with the proxy war, as it made Turkey de facto neighbors with both Russia and the U.S. without having actual borders.

Out of this growing uncertainty and distrust, both with the U.S. and Russia, Turkey tested its first extreme with Moscow, by downing a Russian aircraft violating its borders. This incident brought Ankara and Moscow to a highly tense point when the two might have escalated into a direct military confrontation. Nevertheless, the two countries' strategic interests prevented this from happening. Yet, it created heavy burdens on Turkey and constrained its military options in Syria. Turkey, during this process, did not receive substantial support from its traditional allies. Instead, they tried to capitalize on constraining Turkey's influence in Syria and supported the expansion of the PYD/YPG. One of the most decisive developments came with the coup attempt on July 15, 2016.³⁸⁷ The weak support messages, delivered

³⁸⁷ Şener Aktürk, "Relations between Russia and Turkey Before, During, and After the Failed Coup of 2016," *Insight Turkey*, 21,no.4 (2019): 97-113.

from the Western capitals, raised the question of whether the West attempted a regime change in Turkey that could significantly paralyze its agency and capacity to act on its interests. On the contrary, the Russian firm and prompt support for the existing democratically elected government in Turkey, against the coup attempt, accelerated the process of reconciliation between the two capitals on different domains, including Syria.

The restoration of relations with Moscow, facilitating the subsequent strategy change in Syria and the initiation of the Astana process marked the second extreme, which triggered the debate among the West questioning Turkey's strategic orientation. Turkey's strategy change from a defensive (Operation Shah Euphrates) to an offensive (Operation Euphrates Shield and the following operations) in Syria, led Turkey to adapt itself to the changing character of conflict and to intervene in the root causes of the security threats. Countering security threats beyond its borders, at their initial resource, was hinged on acquiring an operational depth and aimed to curtail their infiltration capacity into the Turkish territories through the tunnels dug from the PYD/YPG-held territories. Such operations expanded the strategic choices and improved the effectiveness of counterterrorism efforts. Relying on the assumptions of security studies that "threats travel faster to shorter distances"³⁸⁸ and that their effectiveness is conditioned on the factors of terrain and distance, the operations conducted beyond its borders, aiming to eliminate threats at their geographical source, produced significant results either in terms of increasing response capacity or reducing the damage they inflict. Otherwise, the terrorist organizations would have dragged Turkey into accepting the fight within its borders, which is equivalent to leaving them the initiative to conduct attacks and determine the scope of the damage they wish to exert that ultimately aims to extract concessions. In other words, by introduc-

³⁸⁸ Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver (eds.), *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 4.

ing military measures beyond its borders, Turkey not only managed to distance the terrorist organizations from its borders but also managed to curb their evolution into long-term threats. Thus, Ankara, through aligning its strategy on the basis of Syrian territorial integrity, managed to impose its safe zone with its traditional rival, Russia, instead of waiting for its traditional allies who were stalling Turkey and were against its operations in Syria.

The causality behind the Turkish strategy change was already discussed in chapter 3, which concluded that the changing threat perceptions from the territorialization of DAESH and the subsequent growing proxy relationship between the U.S. and the PYD/YPG, inadvertently, triggered the growth of distrust and divergence between Ankara and Washington. A similar distrust had also grown between Moscow and Ankara, since both approached the problem sets from different angles, defined through their diverging interests. Furthermore, Moscow does not recognize either the PYD/YPG or the PKK as a terrorist organization whereas Washington at least lists the PKK as a terrorist organization. So, how did Turkey manage to reconcile with Moscow that was regarded as a traditional rival rather than with Washington that is categorized as the traditional ally.

It was discussed that the major overarching problem that implicated the strategic calculus of the state actors is the way the terrorist non-state actors territorialized and how they started to condition the behaviors of state actors. Moscow and Ankara were enticed to cooperate on the concern of territorialization, which had appeared at the expense of Syrian territorial integrity, whereas it constitutes the basic divergence between Washington and Ankara. The driving force behind the cooperation/alignment between Moscow and Ankara lies in this distinct common approach. On the other hand, the West continued to be indifferent to Turkey's security concerns and even attempted to capitalize from the deteriorating relations with Moscow, during the Russian jet downing incident to extract political concessions on the vital security concerns

of Turkey, or to condition their limited support to weaken the growing relations with Moscow, as was observed in the S-400 case and Idlib.³⁸⁹

The other side of the coin, the relations between Moscow and Turkey, is still laden with skepticism. Neither Moscow nor Ankara managed to overcome the embedded distrust in their relations. It is not intended here to repeat the already-held discussions on the potential friction points between Moscow and Ankara, which are listed as the posture on the fate of the PYD/YPG and Idlib's future. Even though these topics are still prone to create tensions, the will to cooperate prevails, which offers optimism on the future of the relations based on Syrian territorial integrity.

The character of relations between Ankara and Washington shares similar traits, such as the PYD/YPG issue and the S-400 debates, which constitute the potential friction points. The bottom line is that Turkey and Washington are waging an undeclared and unnamed proxy war to each other, through the PYD/YPG. The most disturbing aspect of this confrontation is its implications on the formal alliance relationship between the two and on NATO's solidarity. The growing agency and Washington's inability to terminate its proxy relationship, which can be seen as the conditioning of non-state actors on state actors, constrain the available options of the U.S., and the process continues to damage both the bilateral relations and alliance relations. In other words, illegal and informal proxy relationships and commitments spoil legal and formal alliance ties and commitments, proving that ad hoc strategies might be counterproductive for broader strategic interests of states.

Ankara's alignment with Moscow instigated broader debates on Turkey's commitment to the NATO alliance. It is claimed that Russia is trying to peel off Turkey from NATO in order to weaken its solidarity. The most significant proof of this claim is founded on the delivery

³⁸⁹ Motasem A Dalloul, "Turkey's Battle in Idlib Exposes US Hypocrisy," *Middle East Monitor*, March 17, 2020, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200317-turkeys-battle-in-idlib-exposes-us-hypocrisy/>.

of sophisticated S-400 air defense systems. Why Ankara opted for the purchase has already been discussed, arguing that the reluctance of the U.S. to deliver Patriots eventually brought about this acquisition, though it also created wider setbacks for F-35s. Washington's insistence and discontent on the S-400s mainly stem from its will to be a single-source provider of weaponry to NATO nations, disregarding free market access and the liberal values they represent by imposing the contrary.

The United States' CAATSA sanctions tailored to counter and undermine the economies of the targeted countries might inflict substantial damage due to the level of integration of Turkey in the liberal world order. However, it will also increase the decisiveness of Turkey to seek alternatives and to deepen its self-reliance. This is already being observed in the Turkish defense industry as its rate of outsource reliance has already shrunk from 90 percent to 30 percent, and continues to decline steadily. It can be suggested that Turkey is well aware of the potential complications of the vulnerabilities that an asymmetric relation might pose on defense industry acquisitions. In other words, should CAATSA sanctions be placed on Ankara, beyond the fact that it will mark a decisive blow to the reliability and accountability of U.S.-sourced military acquisitions, as part of this process, it also has the potential to lead Turkey to conclude that it should no longer be equipped with U.S.-sourced military hardware. On the other hand, the debates on whether Turkey is heading out of NATO, or whether Turkey is sliding into Moscow's orbit can be seen as the outward reflection of Western unwillingness to recognize the gap between Turkey's actual and perceived power.³⁹⁰

In that sense, the shift of axis debates can be suggested as being the products of the mischaracterization and misrepresentation

³⁹⁰ Ali Balci, "A Three-Level Analysis of Turkey's Crisis with the U.S.-Led Order," *Insight Turkey*, 21, no.4 (2019): 18; Şaban Kardaş, "Turkey: A Regional Power Facing a Changing International System," *Turkish Studies*, 14, no.4 (2013).

of Turkey's capacity to act independently to eliminate the security challenges it faces and to meet its strategical needs. Turkey already successfully introduced drone warfare to eliminate and mitigate the adverse effects of proxy war, as was observed against the territorialization of DAESH, the PYD/YPG, and against the regime in Idlib. On the other hand, Ankara is cautious about the dangers inherent in building asymmetric relations with Moscow, and it is not willing to slide into a Russia-led order or become susceptible to Moscow's initiative. Russian existence in Syria and its military posture still continues to create a security concern to Turkey, while the U.S. is supporting much more serious ones by threatening the territorial integrity of Syria through supporting the PYD/YPG/SDF, which poses highly critical secessionist terrorist threats to Turkey.

What matters for Turkey can simply be answered with the concept of strategic autonomy³⁹¹ and recognition of its security concerns and strategical needs by the countries that are willing to build constructive relations. Turkey does not want to be simply a subordinate actor of any order or a marginal member of the Western camp. Turkey seeks recognition of its transformation from a periphery country to a central one.

³⁹¹ Tarık Oğuzlu, "Yeni Dünya Düzeni ve Türk Dış Politikası," in *Türk Dış Politikasını Nasıl Bilirdiniz?*, Ümit Özdağ and Yelda Demirağ (eds.), 91-110, (Ankara: Kripto, 2017), 94; Tarık Oğuzlu, "Turkey and the West: The Rise of Turkey-Centric Westernism," *International Journal*, 66, no.4 (2011): 981-998.

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This book will answer the key research question of which characteristics (changing or enduring) of the Syrian War caused Turkey and Russia to oscillate between the extremes of war and alliance. By focusing on these characteristics in Syria, commonly accepted as a proxy war but with subtle changes to the definition due to its context, this book shows how the changing character of war influences state behaviors and relations both between and among them. Addressing the underlying question of what makes states cooperate while carrying on and/or being forced to accommodate diverging strategic ends, conditioned by unbalanced military power and laden with contentious agendas, uncovers the embedded controversies of the process that facilitates this oscillation. Finally, to reveal the broader implications, highlight the relevance, and to make a contribution to the literature based on the research, this study addresses the overarching question of how proxy wars alter interstate relations and relations within alliances.

